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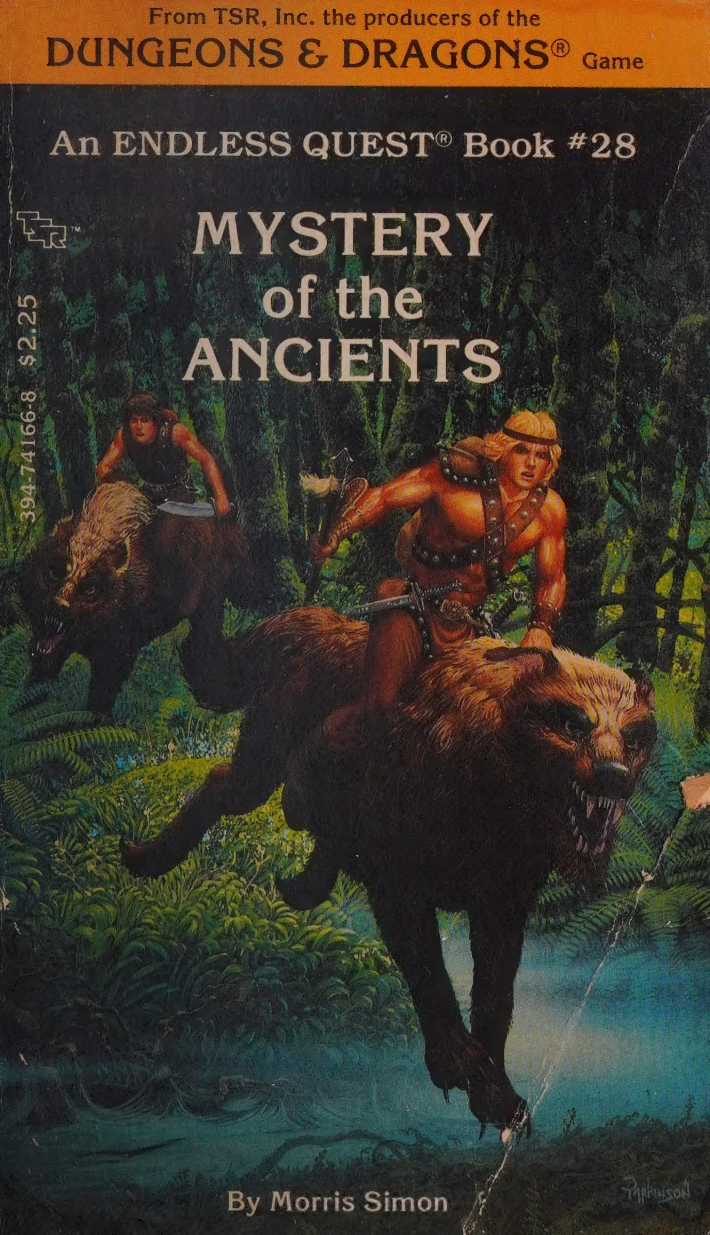
An ENDLESS QUEST® Book #28

MYSTERY of the ANCIENTS

394-74166-8 $2.25



By Morris Simon

STALKED BY AN UNSEEN CREATURE!

As you search for a way out of the thick, dark forests of the Forbidden Zone, you're so intent upon your search that at first you fail to hear the sound of footsteps following you. Stopping to rest momentarily against a tree, you finally hear them. Judging from the heavy sounds, some kind of large creature is close behind you, approaching fast!

Looking around desperately for someplace to hide, you spot an overhangng tree branch and pull yourself up to conceal yourself in its protective cover. Suddenly the unseen creature bursts into the moonlight, sending a cold shiver down your spine. It's a robot!

The huge metallic creature stops directly beneath you, obviously sensing that you must be nearby.

What will you do?

1) If you think your best chance is to attack the robot now, before it discovers your hiding place, turn to page 108.

2) If you decide to remain concealed in the tree and see what happens, turn to page 44.

Whatever choice you make, you are sure to find adventure as you seek to solve
THE MYSTERY OF THE ANCIENTS

An ENDLESS QUEST® Book #28

MYSTERY of the ANCIENTS

BY MORRIS SIMON

A GAMMA WORLD™ ADVENTURE BOOK

Cover Art by Keith Parkinson
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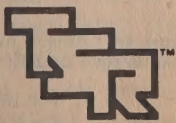

TSR, Inc.
PRODUCTS OF YOUR IMAGINATION™

To Shelley,
formerly of the real Olix

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First printing: May, 1985
Printed in the United States of America
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 84-91357
ISBN: 0-88038-217-1

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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YOU MUST SURVIVE IN A DEVASTATED WORLD!

In *Mystery of the Ancients*, you are Ard, a young man living in a possible world of the future. In this world, man has been forced to live much as he did when spears and survival were a way of life. The people of this primitive society are both helped and confused by the remnants they find of a civilization far more advanced than inhabitants of the twentieth century can imagine.

Legend says that long ago, so long that no one you, as Ard, know was living then, terrible wars swept the civilized world, leaving vast wastelands where no man can live.

Before the wars began, man was ruler of the Earth. But one result of these terrible wars was that creatures rose from the ashes of the bombs. The genes of the earth's animals and plants were altered, until strange, new creatures arose—creatures of awesome power and fierceness and often great intelligence.

As Ard, you have lived all of your nearly sixteen years among such creatures and among the strange artifacts—inexplicable, often dangerous—of the Ancients who created this now devastated civilization whose ruins you live among. Your home is the small village of Olix, in what was once the state of Louisiana, U.S.A. Since the murder of your parents nearly ten years ago, life for you has been difficult but relatively peaceful—but all that is about to change. . . .

"Look, Ard!" yells Vik, crashing through the thick canebrake toward you and your sister. Your young brother is waving his hunting spear, proud of the small hoggit impaled on its stone point. You and Toki stop loading the thick bamboo onto the wagon to congratulate the ten-year-old boy.

"That's a nice one, Vik!" you exclaim. "Hoggit's the best meat in this swamp." The small creature with a pig's snout and the long ears of a jackrabbit is prized among your people for its tender, juicy meat.

"Help him skin it while I put some wood on the fire," says Toki, heading for your campsite a few yards away. While your twin sister collects dry twigs, you and Vik dress the animal and prepare to roast it for dinner.

For nearly ten years, Vik and Toki have been your only real family. Your parents were killed by the wild Red Death cult in a raid somewhere near Zreevepor. Some hunters from the small village of Olix heard the screams and chased the Red Death away. The Olix Elders adopted all of you into their clan, and you've lived there since then. You and Toki will soon be sixteen, and the sturdy bamboo poles you've been gathering are for the walls of your own hut—a symbol of becoming an adult in Olix.

The afternoon shadows are long when you finish the last bite of the succulent hoggit meat. "It'll be too dark to cut any more cane in a few hours," you tell Toki and Vik. "We

already have enough for the walls, and the wagon's full. Let's go back to Olix and return tomorrow for some longer poles and thatch for the roof."

"Since we've got some extra time, I want to go to the ruins and look for ancient tools!" cries Vik. He's talking about the crumbling walls of huge buildings built by the Ancients during the Shadow Years. They're only several hundred yards away from your campsite, where the creek passes by miles of bomb craters and other scars of the Social Wars that destroyed the Ancients' civilizations.

"No, Vik," you tell your brother. "There may be some dangerous weapons left in those ruins."

"Oh, relax, Ard!" says Toki. "You worry too much. All the Olix children play in those old buildings, and no one's ever been hurt. You and I used to poke around in that junk all the time, too." You look into Toki's unworried blue eyes and shrug your shoulders.

"All right! I can see I'm outnumbered!" you exclaim, wishing for a moment that you weren't responsible for your adventuresome brother. "Go ahead, but only until I finish loading this bamboo. You go with him, Toki, to make sure he doesn't—"

"We'll be okay," Vik interrupts, "and I don't need you or Toki to protect me!" Before you can reply, they're gone, running along the stream and splashing in the water like two happy otters. You shake your head and grin,

remembering how independent you felt when you were Vik's age only a few years ago.

You start loading the large poles onto the cart, imagining what they'll look like as the walls of your new hut. "We can make the roof out of some rice straw," you think. "I saw some—"

BOOM! A loud explosion from the direction of the ruins interrupts your thoughts!

"VIK! TOKI!" you scream, dropping an armload of poles and racing through the tall weeds toward the old buildings. You're almost at the ruins when you see Vik stumbling over the pieces of ancient walls.

"Ard! Over here!" he yells, waving his arms in panic. "Toki's hurt!" You feel your stomach tighten as you reach your brother's side.

"Down there!" he yells, pointing to a crater. Staring downward through the dust, you can barely make out Toki's slim legs, covered with rubble. You scramble into the crater and start pulling pieces of shattered concrete off your sister's still body.

"It was my fault!" sobs Vik, as he helps uncover her. "I found a small plastic pouch and gave it to Toki. She was trying to open it when it began to hum. She threw it as far as she could, but it blew up just as she turned to run!" Vik's dusty face is streaked with tears.

"Just dig! It wasn't your fault!" you cry, trying to make him feel better. Soon, you uncover Toki's slender body. She's lying facedown, with her cheek pressed against the rocky ground.

You bend close to her mouth and feel a faint breath against your cheek.

"She's still breathing!" you exclaim.

"Look!" Vik cries, pointing at Toki's head. Just beneath your sister's short blond hair, you see what looks like a needle surrounded by a tiny drop of blood sticking into the nape of her neck.

"It's a piece of steel wire!" you whisper loudly. "It might be near her brain! We shouldn't move her, Vik. Run to the village for help!" He nods and leaps to his feet, already racing toward Olix. You brush as much of the dust as you can from Toki's back and cover her with your fur cape. Her breathing is regular, but she never moves a muscle or makes a sound.

The village is only a few miles away, but it seems like hours before you see Vik's boyish figure running toward you. Hobbling behind him is the skinny shape of Forl, the village medicine man.

"Get out of the away, Ard!" yells Forl, waving his wrinkled hand. "Let me look at her." You wait at the rim of the crater with Vik while the withered shaman kneels beside Toki's body. He carefully opens a rusty metal box with a faded red cross on it. You recognize it as a sacred healing kit of the Ancients, one of the medicine man's most prized possessions.

Forl takes a piece of dirty white cloth, which he calls his "gawz," and wraps it around his own wrinkled forehead. Then he removes a lit-

tle bottle with a skull on its label, the sacred potion called "eye-dine," and puts a drop of the brown liquid on his tongue. You've seen this healing ritual before, and you know that Forl will now try to see inside Toki's body.

"Send me the girl's twin!" the shaman commands in a trembling voice.

You step carefully over the rubble and stand before the old medicine man. Forl puts both his hands on your shoulders and raises his head to the sky with his eyes clenched shut. He's trying to use you, as Toki's closest kinsman, to talk to her spirit. The shaman chants something in an ancient dialect, squeezing your shoulders with surprising strength for such an old man. Finally, he stops and stares at you with his watery yellow eyes.

"Toki's spine has a sliver of steel in it, close to her brain, Ard," he says in a hoarse whisper. "Since you're the head of her family, you must choose the way of healing."

"What can you do for her?" you cry.

"I myself can do nothing," replies Forl. "Only a Healer of the White Hand may remove the steel splinter from your sister's neck."

"But the White Hand village is in the Dark Bayou, beyond the Forbidden Zone!" you exclaim. "The Elders would never let us cross the zone, even to save Toki's life!"

"There's another way!" cries Vik. "We could take her to the idol at Nakitz!" As your brother mentions the legendary healing relic

of the Archivist cult at Nakitz, Forl spits into the white dust.

"No!" growls the shaman. "Even the Forbidden Zone would be safer than that cursed idol. We're trying to save Toki, not kill her brothers!"

1) If you want to cross the Forbidden Zone into the Dark Bayou and bring a Healer of the White Hand to Toki, turn to page 33.

2) If you'd rather use the legendary idol of the Archivist cult at Nakitz to help Toki, turn to page 30.

"You're right, of course," you tell Sared. "We'll be back in Olix within a few days. I doubt if the zoopremisists would attack before then, and Toki's life does depend upon how quickly we can return with the idol."

The Elder nods with a smug smile. "I thought you'd see it my way," he says. "Now let's get going. We've wasted enough time on this miserable creature!"

Sared kicks the dogman's corpse and turns back toward the trail. Vik looks at you with a puzzled expression.

"Why is he so angry all the time?" your brother murmurs as you start to follow behind the Elder. "He seems even more anxious to get to Nakitz than we are, and it's our sister who's sick!"

"I've been wondering about that, too," you reply. "I guess he's just a little cranky." Vik shrugs his shoulders and drops the subject, but his question remains on your mind.

The trail continues through the forest for several miles, then it joins a wide strip of black rock called "azfall," a material the Ancients used to build their highways. The old road runs north and south, and it leads directly to the ancient city of Nakitz on the Gulf of Mecksgo.

"Come on!" Sared calls impatiently from the old highway. "Nakitz is more than forty miles away, and I want to camp close enough tonight to reach the Archivist temple before noon tomorrow."

Vik starts to complain about being tired, but you signal for him to be quiet. "Sared's right," you tell him. "We need to cover as much distance today as we can." You walk more slowly, keeping your brother company far behind the impatient councillor.

By dusk, you've covered many miles on the azfall road, passing by countless ruined towns of the Ancients with their many secrets buried beneath the crumbling walls. Sared stops near one deserted building and motions for you and your brother to join him.

"We'll camp here," says the Elder. "There's water behind this rubble and enough wood to build a fire. Fill our waterskins while I start a fire."

Sared's demanding tone is insulting to you as a fellow warrior, but you welcome the opportunity to do some exploring among these ruins. You and Vik hack your way through the thick weeds to a rusted machine of some kind at the rear of the building. It appears to be a vehicle once used by the Ancients, perhaps one of the machines designed to travel on the black highway of azfall.

You climb into the open vehicle, studying the broken dials and trying to imagine what purpose each of them served. Vik is more interested in the brook and goes on hacking a path to the water with his machete. Suddenly, a loud cry from the front of the ruins tears your concentration away from the rusted machine.

By the time you clamber out of the old vehicle, Vik is already racing to the front of the building. You draw your cutlass on the run and follow your brother. Around the corner, Sared is charging furiously toward a large metal creature standing in the middle of the road. It's a humanoid robot, with arms and legs like a man, as well as a pair of writhing tentacles projecting from its metallic chest!

"Monster! Tool of death!" Sared is screaming. The Elder seems to have gone berserk and is swinging his heavy battle mace at the robot. The weapon's spiked end crashes into the humanoid machine's chest, but it doesn't even dent the metal.

The creature's brain dome suddenly flashes a bright red light. "Control yourself, human," says the robot in a calm, normal voice. "Your attack has initiated my defense program. Further violence may be hazardous to you since my energy shield is now activated."

"I'll destroy you, demon!" yells Sared. The crazed Elder swings his mace at the transparent dome atop the robot's body, trying to shatter the glass bubble that contains the mechanical figure's brain.

The weapon stops in midair, inches from the faceless head, as if halted by an invisible barrier. A brilliant flare of bluish light envelops the mace and travels the length of its handle to Sared's hand. The expression on the warrior's bearded face changes from fury to agony, and the Elder slumps to the azfall road at the

robot's feet. Before you can stop him, Vik charges the powerful metallic creature with his machete!

"VIK! STOP!" you yell, but the boy is too excited to hear you. His machete hacks at the robot's chest, striking the same invisible shield. The blue light flares again, but this time envelops your brother's entire body! Vik is wracked by a convulsion that knocks the machete loose from his hand and slams him to the hard road surface!

You yell in rage and rush toward the robot with your cutlass raised above your head.

"DON'T DO THAT!" screams a voice from your right. You freeze in your steps and whirl toward the speaker. A tall, well-muscled man dressed in a tight plastic uniform of sky blue is standing at the edge of the road. He's wearing a wide belt with many strange objects on it, including a gun in a holster, but his hands are empty.

"Boxer's a security robot!" he yells. "His defense screen will paralyze you! If you'll sheathe that handsome pirate's sword, I'll see what I can do for your two friends."

1) If you feel you have no choice but to do as the stranger asks, turn to page 93.

2) But if you cannot trust the stranger after what his robot has done to your companions, turn to page 139.

From the shadows, you spot the humanoid in the torn uniform whom you chased from the cave. He's with two other men dressed in similar clothes, like policemen from the Shadow Years. They're all holding blazing torches and staring at Vik. A pair of strange armored creatures are tying the youngster's hands behind his back!

The armored creatures are badders—mutated badgers who often terrorize and raid small villages near Olix! The evil badgeroids have bound a bright red cloth of some kind around your brother's eyes and are chattering loudly in their whistling language.

One of them has another red cloth in its paw and jabs its dagger through it, using the material to polish the slender blade. A cold chill spreads over you as you recognize the secret signal of the Red Death terrorists! These mutants and badders must belong to the same cult that killed your parents, and now they've captured Vik!

While you watch, the three humanoids tell the badgeroids to hurry. The badders push Vik forward, making him stumble blindly on the rubble. One of the humanoids ties a rope around your brother's waist and begins leading him away. They seem to be headed for the edge of the Forbidden Zone.

You wait until their torches are just bobbing dots in the distance and then follow them, with spear and cutlass at the ready for quick action. Soon, they lead you across the barren

zone to the edge of a thick forest. Only a few hundred yards inside the woods, the torches seem to stop. Several minutes later, you see the flames of a camp fire cast shadows against the trees. Your brother's captors are camping for the night!

1) If you want to sneak into the terrorists' camp and try to free Vik, turn to page 54.

2) If you'd rather try a surprise attack, turn to page 97.

3) If you want to find help before trying to rescue your brother, turn to page 27.

You can't stand the thought of leaving the Red Death fanatics free to terrorize and murder helpless people. The Elders in Olix have been waiting for an opportunity to trap the killers, and now you can lead your fellow warriors against them.

"I have to return to my village and report the location of the terrorists' sector to my Elders," you tell Rader. "If I wait until we get back from Nakitz, the Red Death may have moved their camp. They might even attack Olix while we're gone. Toki couldn't stand the fury of a battle in our village!"

The Collector frowns and points to the still figures sprawled in the campsite. "Those fanatics aren't going anywhere for a while. Come with Boxer and me first. Then, if you still want to fight the Red Death, you can!"

"No, my mind's made up!" you tell him.

"Oh, well, never argue with a warrior! At least let us show you the trail to Olix."

You thank the Collector and accept his offer to guide you to the trail. It's only a few miles away from the terrorists' camp, and you mark a tree so that you can find the campsite again when you bring back the warriors.

Vik is still weak, and you have to travel slowly, letting him rest often along the way. The sun has just risen when you reach the open fields near your home village.

Please turn to page 149.

"I can't leave Sared here, even if he is a Seeker," you tell Rader. "He's still an Elder of Olix, and the council would probably banish us all from the clan if I deserted him. We'd better just stay here until both Sared and Vik are able to travel, and then go on to Nakitz."

The Collector shakes his head. "I'm not going to leave you and your brother with that fanatic. He's a sick, dangerous man! And your sister's life depends upon speed now."

"But what else can I do?" you cry.

"What WE can do is take this lunatic back to Olix in the transport, and use it to carry your sister to Nakitz!" suggests Rader.

His offer is so generous that you can only mumble your thanks to the Collector. "Never mind the gratitude," he says gruffly. "Just help me get your brother and the Seeker into the backseat. We're wasting time. It'll be dawn before we get back on the road!"

You pick up Vik's small body while Rader and his robot put Sared in the rear of the transport. Then you lay him on the seat beside the unconscious Elder. "Get in there with them, Boxer, and use a stun stick on that Seeker if he starts to wake up," says Rader as you join him in the front.

The Collector programs the vehicle's computer for the trip to Olix, explaining each button as he presses it. You're fascinated with the man's knowledge of the complicated controls and hope that he'll show you more secrets of the Ancients in the days ahead.

The powerful transport lifts from the ground a few feet to turn around, then flashes forward to the north. "This road goes to Zreevepor," says Rader. "It's not the shortest route to Olix, but it's the fastest."

It's still dark when you turn off the azfall highway onto the trail leading past the ruins where Toki was hurt. The transport's silent engine allows you to arrive at the outskirts of the sleeping village without waking any of your kinsmen.

"You carry your brother inside your hut," says Rader. "Boxer and I will handle the New Dawner and then help you with your sister."

You follow the Collector's instructions, lifting Vik's unconscious body from the vehicle and taking him into the hut. You lay him on the floor beside Toki's cot and check on your sister's condition. Her pulse and breathing are very weak, and you hope that the trip to Olix won't kill her.

"Move away and let me give her a shot," whispers Rader from the doorway. He has a small plastic box in his hand, probably some kind of ancient medical kit. The Collector removes a strange device from the kit and holds it to the torchlight. It's a small bottle with a needle in one end and a plunger in the other. Rader quickly jabs the needle into Toki's arm and injects all of the fluid from the bottle.

"That was just a shot of stimdose," he tells you. "It won't wake her up, but it may keep

everything working inside her until we get to Nakitz. Take her to the transport, Boxer!"

The robot lifts your sister's body very gently, using both arms and both tentacles. Then he floats toward the vehicle using his pods instead of walking. Boxer lays Toki inside the rear compartment and climbs in beside her, his tentacles wrapped delicately around her body to keep her from jarring.

"Let's go!" whispers Rader.

The first dim light of dawn is just appearing when you reach the ancient highway and turn toward Nakitz. The Collector sets the engine on its highest speed. You travel so fast that you can see nothing but blurs of trees and ruined buildings along the road.

It's not even noon when Rader finally has to slow down because of the many pilgrims crowded onto the old highway in front of the temple. He inches the transport forward, pushing through the mob of disfigured mutants and horrible cripples. Everyone around you looks like a monster! There are claws and pincers where hands should be, shells and scales instead of human flesh, and even a man with the head and limbs of a squid!

"These are the idol's patients," explains Rader. "They flock here every day, hoping that the Archivists will choose them to be healed. Since the Archies only let a few people into the temple each day, most of these mutants are just wasting their time."

A sudden dread sinks into your brain. "How

do they select the people to be healed?" you demand. "Will they let Toki into the temple?"

"We won't know until we try," says the Collector. "That's one of the priestesses over there in the tight red uniform." Rader is nodding toward a tall woman commanding a small group of men who seem to be temple guards. They're all clad in skintight uniforms like Rader's, but bright scarlet instead of blue. An emblem of a human eye inside a triangle—the sacred symbol of the Archivist cult—is emblazoned on each of their chests.

"Go tell the priestess about your sister," Rader urges. "She may let you go right in. If not, we'll think of another plan."

You push your way through the mob of deformed mutants, finally reaching the woman and her guards. She listens to your story about Toki's accident and then glances at the transport.

"You're with a Collector!" she says suddenly. "Collectors aren't welcome here unless they offer ancient relics to the keepers of the temple—and the same thing applies to their friends. Take your sister elsewhere!"

The priestess's cruelty makes your face hot with anger. Your hand drops to your cutlass, but the squad of guards have already drawn strange weapons and stand tensed for an attack. You turn without a word and walk back to the transport to report your failure.

"I hear that garbage all the time!" says Rader. "Collectors have a bad name among

the Archies because they seek ancient artifacts, too. Well, Ard, as I see it, there are only two things we can do—find a way to take the idol by force, or come up with an offering that greedy priestess will like!"

1) If you want to try to storm the temple and take the idol, turn to page 145.

2) If you prefer to offer the priestess a bribe, turn to page 153.

Your body shakes with anger as you watch the five terrorists relax around their camp fire. It was Red Death cult members who killed both your parents, and now they've kidnapped your brother!

For a moment, you consider charging the terrorists while they're eating, but then you decide that their weapons are too handy for a surprise attack to work. You must find the trail back to Olix so that you can summon more warriors to rescue Vik. With a silent oath to have your revenge on the Red Death fanatics, you slip away into the deep forest.

You wander for more than an hour in the dark woods, looking for a path leading toward your village. You're so intent upon your search that you never hear the footsteps until you stop to rest against a tree. Judging from the heavy sounds, a large creature of some kind is following you and is less than a hundred yards away!

In desperation, you leap for the nearest overhanging limb and pull yourself up into the tree's protective branches. Then you wait in silence for whatever has been tracking you through the forest to appear.

You tense your muscles, prepared to hurl your spear at your pursuer. The dry branches and leaves on the forest floor crack even louder as the unseen creature approaches. Suddenly, it bursts through the undergrowth into a patch of moonlight, sending a shock to your brain. It's a robot!

The monster is the size of a tall man, with two arms and legs. Instead of a head, the robot has a shiny dome of some kind of clear material, with tiny blinking lights inside it. A pair of cables extend from its chest plate, like writhing tentacles in front of the monster. At its waist, you see a row of strange objects, several of which you recognize as grenades.

The robot stops beneath your tree and bends closer to the ground. One of its tentacles takes a small boxlike object from its waist and passes it over the fallen leaves. The object glows with a soft red light, which becomes dimmer as the tentacle moves the box farther away from your footprints.

It is only a matter of seconds before the robot's computer brain will realize that the only direction you could have gone is up!

1) If you think your best chance is to attack the robot before its sensors locate you, turn to page 108.

2) If it seems wise to remain in the tree and see what happens, turn to page 44.

Vik's mention of the legendary idol at Nakitz makes you remember some of the stories you've heard about the secret healing powers of the statue. It is said that many seriously ill and wounded people are taken by their kinsmen to the Archivist shrine at Nakitz every day, and that most of them are cured!

"The White Hand Healers might be unwilling to come to Olix, and the rugged trek to Nakitz could kill Toki," you tell Forl. "I'll have to bring the Archivists' sacred statue to her!"

"That's crazy!" the old shaman wheezes. "The Archivists at Nakitz will never let you take the idol away from its shrine. Hundreds of pilgrims visit the Archivist temple every day to be healed by that ancient statue."

"We don't have a choice, Forl! Toki will die unless we find a way to remove the splinter from her spine!"

"You're her kinsman, Ard, and you have the right to choose in this matter," says the shaman, "but you should consult the Elders before undertaking such a dangerous trek. Your actions in Nakitz could mean war with the Archivists!"

Forl's warning is true. The Archivists are a cult of fanatics who worship any relics of the Ancients. They would stop at nothing to protect their sacred healing idol, one of the most famous of all artifacts from the Shadow Years before the great Social Wars.

"All right," you agree, "we'll take Toki to Olix, where she can rest more safely. I'll consult with the Elders before I go to Nakitz, but only to learn as much as possible about the idol. No one's going to stop me from using it to heal my sister!"

You dump the load of bamboo and make a bed of giant mink blankets in the cart. Then you and Forl lift Toki very gently onto the bed of soft furs. When you reach Olix, you call immediately for an emergency council meeting to describe your plans.

The Elders of Olix shake their heads when you tell them what you want to do.

"We cannot raid the Nakitz temple for the idol," says Pim, the village headman and senior Elder. "Such an action would mean war with the Archivists, and they possess many secret weapons of the Ancients. Using them, they could destroy Olix and all our people."

The other Elders murmur their agreement with Pim, clapping their hands to show approval of his decision. The stocky warrior strokes his silver beard and waits for the applause to die in the cramped hut.

"We must still find a way to cure our adopted daughter, Toki," he adds, nodding gravely in your direction. "Perhaps there's a more peaceful way to use the idol of Nakitz. Can any of you offer Ard your wisdom?"

"I can, Pim!"

All heads turn to the speaker, a slender, dark man with streaks of gray in his wiry black

beard. He is Sared, one of the younger council members. You've never talked to him, and know only that he lives alone and sometimes disappears from the village for long periods without telling anyone. Sared is also a famed warrior, preferring mace and shield rather than relics such as laser pistols.

"Speak, Elder Sared," says Pim. "Give your counsel to our young clansman."

"There is a slim chance that the Archivists will allow us to borrow the idol," suggests Sared. "I myself have seen the statue and believe that the temple priests might be willing to lend it to us—for a price!"

"What price?" you demand. "We have nothing to trade for the idol."

"Let the Archivists determine that," replies Sared. "I know one of the priests. We could go to Nakitz and bargain with him. If you would agree to bring some particular relics to the temple, he might allow you to borrow the idol long enough to heal your sister."

Sared's plan sounds simple—perhaps TOO simple! You hesitate, uncertain about promising relics you don't have to the Archivists.

1) If you decide to follow Sared's plan and go with him to Nakitz, continue the adventure on page 57.

2) If you'd rather take your chances among the Archivists alone, turn to page 40.

"That metal splinter's too close to Toki's brain to risk the trip to Nakitz. We'll have to bring a Healer to her!" you tell Forl.

You know very little about the secret cult of Healers, except that they live in isolated communities and have sworn vows to heal anyone who comes to them, friend or foe. If a member of the White Hand sect ever refuses to heal an enemy, he or she is banished forever from the community.

"But the Elders will never let us enter the Forbidden Zone!" cries Vik.

"Your brother speaks with wisdom for one so young," agrees Forl. "My kinsmen fear the zone so deeply that they might even kill to stop you from violating the taboo! The most terrible secret of the Ancients lies sleeping beneath the ground in the Forbidden Zone. The death rays there make monsters of our babies!"

"Well, they don't bother the White Handers!" you reply. "They live just beyond the Forbidden Zone in the Dark Bayou and travel freely throughout the zone. If they can survive the death rays, so can we!"

"The Healers know many secrets of the Ancients, but you don't!" warns Forl.

"Vik and I will start for the Dark Bayou at dawn tomorrow," you tell him. "Every second we wait could mean death for Toki. If you'll take her back to Olix for us, we can leave from our camp and save several hours."

"I will tend to your sister," agrees the sha-

man, "but when I reach the village, I must tell the Elders where you have gone. You are violating a dangerous taboo!"

You and Vik make Toki as comfortable as possible on the cart, wrapping her gently in a blanket of giant mink fur. Forl grasps the handles of the wagon and begins to pull it slowly toward Olix. As soon as the old man is too far away to hear, you tell Vik to get his equipment from the campsite.

"And hurry!" you demand. "When Forl tells the Elders our plan, they'll try to stop us. We're crossing the zone tonight, before anyone can track us!"

Vik grabs the machete you were using to cut the bamboo and sticks it in his belt so that it resembles your rare steel cutlass, a gift from Toki when you became a warrior of Olix. You grin at your brother and strap a small hand ax to the outside of your knapsack.

Within minutes, you're trekking westward toward the desolate, grassless plain called the Forbidden Zone.

The sun is a sinking red globe on the horizon when you first glimpse the barren wastelands where the Ancients fought their last nuclear war. In the distance, several heaps of dusty rubble have begun to glow in the twilight, illuminated by pockets of deadly radiation trapped in the rubble of collapsed walls of destroyed buildings.

"We have to be careful where we step, Vik," you tell the boy. "I've heard there are places in

the Forbidden Zone where the ground just vanishes beneath your feet!"

"Why doesn't anything grow out here?" Vik asks as you pick your way carefully through the rubble of the Ancients' buildings.

"The Elders say that the death rays of the Social Wars still burn in the zone."

Vik's eyes widen in the bright moonlight. He's only ten years old, and your words have scared him. "I think the Elders just tell us those things to keep us out of the zone," you say, trying to make him feel better.

Your brother's face relaxes a little, but you know that there must be many real dangers in the Forbidden Zone. There've been too many stories for all of them to be just legends. You lead Vik through the ruins, making wide detours around the glowing piles of broken walls. You don't know if those are the death rays you've heard about, but you're not taking any chances.

"Look, Ard! A light!"

Vik is pointing straight ahead, toward a dark pile of concrete. A collapsed wall has fallen over some other rubble, forming an artificial cave. A flickering yellow light shines on the stones at its opening, and a shadow is moving inside the cave.

"Try to get as close as you can to the opening," you whisper. "I'll circle around the wall. Watch for my blade. When I wave it, yell and dive back into the shadows. We'll surprise whoever's in there!"

Your brother hesitates for a moment, then nods and starts to scramble silently toward the firelight. You draw your cutlass and trot into the deeper shadows. When you reach the rear of the collapsed wall, you climb softly on top of it and crawl toward the cave opening at the front. Vik is crouched just outside the area of firelight, waiting for your signal. You wave the shiny steel blade of your cutlass above your head.

"Come out of there!" Vik yells.

You hear a muffled cry from inside the crude shelter just before a dark figure fills the entrance and blots out the light. It's a humanoid creature dressed in a tattered military uniform of some kind. He's the size of a normal man, but his fingers end in long claws, like those of an animal! His brutish face is sneering as he stares into the darkness.

You crouch and get ready to leap onto the unarmed creature's back. But before you can move, he whirls around and looks right at you, as if he knew you were there! Suddenly, the man's strange eyes burn with a fiery glare. A beam of bright red light streams through the darkness from his eyes and strikes your forehead with a crushing force.

"HEY! Leave my brother alone!" Vik's shrill cry comes just as the boy's spear hurtles from the shadows at the dark figure. The stone tip grazes the stranger's leg, ripping through the ragged uniform pants and biting into his thigh. With a howl of pain, the creature cuts

off the beam of red light, leaving you with a terrible headache. The stranger snarls in rage and dodges into the shadows, running and stumbling across the rubble.

Vik has already recovered his spear and is leaping over the piles of broken concrete after the man.

"Come back, Vik! It's too dangerous! Let him go!" you yell, but your brother is too excited to hear you. You slide to the ground and run through the darkness after Vik, hoping to stop him before he gets hurt.

You've gone only a few dozen yards when you hear Vik's loud cry from the shadows ahead, followed by the crash of falling stone. Just in front of you, a gaping hole has appeared in the ground, and from it emanates a soft greenish glow. Vik has fallen into one of the old basements of the Forbidden Zone, and is lying unconscious below you, his youthful body glowing with the green death rays of the Ancients!

The only way to rescue your brother is to climb down and bring him out! Pulling a length of vine rope from your pack, you secure it to the rubble at the rim of the hole and lower yourself into the basement. The ancient radiation floods your brain with energy waves of some kind. You try to ignore them and tie the rope around Vik's still body. Then you climb back to the surface and pull him out of the underground chamber.

For some unknown reason, your body has

not absorbed the death rays, but Vik's entire form glows with the throbbing green light! You have no idea what the rays may have done to his body. He seems to be breathing, but you can't wake him!

1) If you want to take Vik back to Olix and let Forl, the shaman, try to heal him, continue the adventure on page 134.

2) If you want to camp in the Forbidden Zone, hoping that Vik will soon be able to resume the trek into the Dark Bayou, turn to page 64.

3) If you decide to leave Vik in the Forbidden Zone and try to find a Healer who can help both him and Toki, turn to page 144.

Something in Sared's voice disturbs you. The Elder seems too excited about going to the Archivists' temple, and you can't imagine that those fanatical collectors of ancient artifacts would ever bargain to allow you to take the idol from its shrine.

"I'm too tired to think about it now," you tell the Elders. "Let me give you my decision in the morning."

"That may be too late!" cries Sared, his black eyes flashing. "Your sister may die!"

Before you can respond to the Elder's outburst, Pim steps between you and Sared. "Ard does not wish for Toki to die, Sared," the headman says firmly. "He must have time to make his decision. We will wait until morning to settle this matter."

For an instant, the dark face of the warrior glowers with contained rage. Then it relaxes as Sared bows to Pim. "As you wish, Elder. My only concern was for the girl."

When you return to your hut, Vik is asleep on the floor beside Toki's still body. You wake the boy and tell him what was said inside the council hut.

"Why don't you want to go with Sared?" he asks. "We need the idol!"

"I know that," you reply impatiently. "But Sared seems too anxious to reach Nakitz. I've decided to go there alone—tonight!"

"Tonight?" cries Vik in a hushed voice. "You can't go into the forest after dark! It's on the edge of the Forbidden Zone, and monsters

hunt in those woods at night!"

"I've heard those old tales, too. There may be some wild animals between here and Nakitz, but my cutlass will handle them!" Your hand slips to the steel hilt of the ancient weapon Toki gave you when you became a warrior. Its keen edge is sharper than a razor, and you've practiced with it for hours each day.

"Take me with you!" Vik demands. "You'll need some help!"

"No, Vik," you say, not wanting to risk your brother's life on the dangerous trek. "I can travel faster alone, and someone needs to stay here with Toki."

The boy's face clouds, but he nods. "I'll wait as long as I can to tell the Elders where you've gone."

"Good! I'll travel all night and be hours ahead of them by morning. That way, there's nothing they can do to stop me!"

You say good-bye to Vik and dart out of the hut into the midnight shadows of the sleeping village. The westward path is seldom traveled and is overgrown with thick bushes. You trot silently along the narrow trail until you're far enough from Olix to light a torch.

Soon, the path becomes hilly and leads into a dense hardwood forest. The bushes and grass have disappeared under a thick blanket of fallen leaves. All around you are the cries and growls of strange forest animals, some sounding almost human.

The glare of your torch is so bright that you can't see beyond its light, but it seems to be keeping the unknown creatures away from you. Just when you've begun to feel safe, a loud crashing of running feet comes from the thick woods on your right! Something or someone is headed straight for you!

1) If you think you would have a better chance of defending yourself against whatever creature is running toward you under the cover of darkness, turn to page 110.

2) If you prefer to wait in hiding until you see what's coming after you, continue on page 46.

You hesitate to accept Rader's offer to help you steal the idol, but the Collector's knowledge of ancient artifacts seems genuine, and it might be easier if all of you work together.

"We'll go with you," you agree, "if you'll take us back to Olix in the transport so that the idol can heal Toki as soon as possible."

"That was in my mind all along, Ard!" exclaims Rader with a grin. "We've got a couple of partners, Boxer!"

Please turn to page 116.

You've never encountered a robot before, but you've heard stories about their powerful weapons. You decide that it would be foolish to attack the mechanical creature with a spear and cutlass, so you press yourself deeper into the shadows of the tree limbs.

Below you, the robot finishes its scan of the ground and raises its domed head. You hope that it won't be able to see in the dark, but its sensors are focused directly on you!

"My infrared heat detectors can see you clearly, human," says the robot. You expected to hear a mechanical tone if the robot talked at all, but this one speaks just like a man. "Descend from the tree at once, or I shall have to assist you."

The thought of the metal creature climbing the tree is so farfetched that you nearly laugh. You pull yourself even higher, standing on limbs so small that they'd surely break under the weight of such a heavy object as the robot.

"Come ahead!" you call with a grin, hoping that the intelligent machine will try to climb so that you can watch it smash to pieces on the ground.

"As you wish," replies the robot in a bored voice.

To your horror, the bulky creature begins to rise slowly from the ground, ascending with a humming noise to your level in the tree! You stare at the blinking lights of its brain and start climbing higher into the smallest branches. Suddenly, your own weight is too

much, and the upper limbs you're grasping tear away from the tree's trunk! Just as the robot's tentacles snake toward your falling body, your head strikes a large branch, and you lose consciousness.

Please turn to page 126.

You want to know what kind of creature is rushing toward you, so you thrust the butt of the torch into the soft ground and dart behind the nearest tree. The torchlight will be a beacon to draw the unsuspecting victim onto the trail, where you can surprise it.

The running footsteps come closer. Finally, a small figure bursts through the thick bushes at the side of the trail. You raise your cutlass, prepared to attack, but let your arm drop to your side when you recognize your intended victim.

"Vik! Why did you follow me?" you demand. "I almost killed you!"

The startled boy stands in the bright torchlight, blinking his eyes and straining to see you in the shadows of the trees. He's carrying his hunting spear and has Toki's machete stuck in his rawhide belt.

"Ard? Is that you?" he cries, squinting. "I came to warn you that the Elders are looking for you!"

You forget your anger, relieved that you didn't attack your brother in the dark. Then you step from the shadows into the firelit circle. "What do you mean, they're looking for me?" you ask the excited boy.

"It's Sared! He came to our hut to talk to you about going to Nakitz. I had to tell him that you'd already gone. He was madder than anybody I ever saw, Ard! He woke up Pim and the other Elders and demanded that they search for you tonight. They all agreed. I sneaked out

of the village while they were preparing to leave!"

"That means they'll catch us if we stay on the trail," you tell Vik. You're glad he told you about the Elders, but you also realize that he'll slow you down. "We'll have to travel cross-country, through the forest. That's the only way we can stay ahead of them."

You grab the torch and stomp it out, plunging the surrounding woods into darkness. "We'll have to find our way in the dark," you tell Vik. "That torch would guide them straight to us—just as it led you to me."

As soon as your eyes adjust to the blackness, you lead your brother from the trail into the unfamiliar forest. You know that the ancient road to Nakitz is somewhere to the west, but it's difficult to see the stars through the thick trees. You've been walking silently for many miles, trying to listen for sounds of wild animals, when Vik's sudden cry startles your tense nerves.

"Look over there! A light!"

Your brother points to a faint glow at the bottom of a steep slope. Your first impulse is to make a wide circle around the light, since it's probably a traveler's camp fire. Then you decide that it would be wiser to check on it before continuing because you'd know who or what was behind you.

With your hand on the hilt of your cutlass, you slide down the steep hillside. Vik is already at the bottom when you reach it, his

machete drawn and ready. The two of you slip silently toward the wooded hollow.

Inside the thicket, you creep closer to the light. When you part the bushes in front of your face, you're startled to see that a large plant is the source of the light. It's shaped like a man-sized palm tree and crowned by a single glowing flower nearly three feet in diameter.

"A flower!" exclaims Vik. "We came down here to look at a flower! And I was ready to use my machete!"

You laugh at your brother's disgusted tone of voice, making him start chuckling, too. With a mock growl, he jumps out of the bushes and charges the strange plant, hacking at it as if it were a monster.

"I'll show you!" he jokes, striking the rough trunklike stem with his machete. Just as the blade cuts into the plant, the flower's glow flares to a blinding intensity! Rainbow colors swirl over Vik's face and body!

"Get away from there!" you yell, leaping forward to grab his arm. Vik seems hypnotized by the multicolored light and doesn't respond to you. You pull him into the shadows of a large tree, but his eyes are still glowing with the colors of the flower!

"Come on, Vik! Move your legs! We've got to get away from those light rays!"

You pull the boy deeper into the woods of the hollow, his stiff legs stumbling over the rough terrain in the dark forest. Though the mysterious plant is far behind you, the fading glow

of its radiation is still visible through the trees. Vik hasn't uttered a word since he attacked the flower, and his eyes still shine with the rainbow colors.

You force your brother to climb a small rise, pushing him in front of you. When you join him at the top of the hill, you look down on a moonlit plain divided by a wide black strip—the ancient highway to Nakitz!

"Just a little farther," you urge Vik, whose trancelike state worries you. "We can rest on the road until morning!"

In a few more minutes, you're standing on the hard black surface called "azfall" that the Ancients sometimes used for their highways. The road stretches as far as you can see to the north and south. The Archivist center of Nakitz is at the southern end of this black strip, on the Gulf of Mecksgo.

You find a patch of grass at the edge of the road and make Vik lie on it, hoping that sleep will help him recover from the effects of the plant's strange light rays. You try to sit up until Vik goes to sleep, but the adventures of the past day and night have exhausted you. The next thing you know, a strong beam of light is glaring in your eyes. It comes from a towering figure standing over you.

It's a robot! The metal humanoid has a pair of shining tentacles between its two arms, and a clear glass dome for a head. Inside the dome, you can see the flickering dots of lights from its computer brain. You've heard stories about

ancient robots, but this is the first one you've ever seen.

"Kindly pardon the intrusion into your sleep, human, but I believe we have found a companion of yours." The robot's voice is a normal human voice, without a trace of anything mechanical. Suddenly, you realize what it said and see that Vik has vanished!

"Please do not be alarmed," soothes the robot. "The child is with the boss, in the transport. I'll take you to him if you wish."

Still groggy, you stumble to your feet and stare beyond the humanoid machine at the sleek vehicle standing in the middle of the azfall road. It's similar to some of the rusted hulks of vehicles you've seen in ancient ruins, but much shinier. Inside its lighted cabin, you see Vik sitting stiffly in one of the seats, next to a man with short black hair. Your brother is staring straight ahead with his glowing eyes.

The man climbs out of the vehicle and waves. "I see Boxer found you," he calls with a grin. "We nearly killed your friend here. He was stumbling toward Nakitz in the center of the road. What's wrong with him, anyway? Perhaps we can be of some help if you'll tell us what happened."

You're sleepy and confused, and can't imagine what this stranger is talking about. His clothes are made of blue plastic molded tightly against his muscular body, reminding you of the faded pictures you've seen in ancient ruins. Things have happened so quickly that

you're not sure if you should trust this stranger and his robot companion.

1) If you decide to take the risk that the man and the robot are trustworthy, turn to page 88.

2) If you want to know more about the stranger before you reveal anything, continue reading on page 109.

Vik is sitting with his back against a tree, still bound and blindfolded. Your brother seems to remain in a trance, and you think that his brain must have been damaged by the rays in the ancient basement. You decide to wait until the terrorists are sleeping, then try to sneak into the camp and free Vik before you do anything else.

From your hiding place in the shadows, you watch the band of terrorists cook some kind of wild meat over their camp fire. You're filled with rage. Members of this Red Death cult killed your mother and father ten years ago! The fanatics have sworn to destroy all intelligent life outside their evil cult, and they kidnap children like your brother to add to their ranks of murderers.

The three humanoid creatures in their ragged uniforms appear to be the leaders of the Red Death squad that holds Vik captive. Each of them growls orders to the mutant badgers, and they make the beasts sit away from the fire while the three eat. The armored beasts snarl, but do as they're told.

Several hours pass before you see the leaders stand and walk into the shadows to lie on the ground. The two badders scramble to the camp fire and take what scraps of food are left. None of the terrorists have offered any of the meat to Vik, but the boy doesn't seem to be hungry.

Finally the badders finish their meal and toss the gnawed bones on the fire. In a few

more minutes, they're curled around the smoldering coals, wheezing and snoring. You wait for another half hour to make sure all five terrorists are sound asleep. Then you slip from the shadows and work your way around the fringe of the campsite to Vik.

Please turn to page 68.

Rader comes closer to whisper his plan. "First of all, I've seen the idol. It's a medical robot, almost identical to Boxer but not as powerful. We could use Boxer's control card to steal it, leaving Boxer in its place, but we don't know if its legs would work after all these centuries."

"Isn't that a risky way to do it?"

"Yes, but it's the easier way!" Rader answers. "If we could figure out how to rob the idol's brain dome of the healing program, I might be able to convert old Boxer here into a combination medical-security robot. That way, we could leave the idol in place and just take its program. The problem with that idea is finding a way to get Boxer close enough to the idol to make the transfer. That plan would be more difficult, but safer."

1) If you prefer the easier but more dangerous plan and want to steal the idol, turn to page 103.

2) If you'd rather try the more difficult but safer transfer of the idol's memory to Boxer, turn to page 131.

"Then that's what I'll do!" you announce to the Elders. "Vik and I will go with Sared to the temple."

"Excellent!" exclaims Pim. "We shall help you prepare for this perilous journey, and care for your sister while you're gone."

"We require only food for a few days, Elder Pim," says Sared, "and our weapons."

"When can we leave?" you ask him.

"At first light. The journey will take us at least two days, and we must travel fast. The forest between here and Nakitz is filled with dangerous creatures who survived the deadly flameless fires of the Ancients' wars. We will need our rest, young warrior!"

Vik is asleep when you return to your hut, so you wait until morning to tell the boy of your plans to find the idol. Your brother asks a flurry of questions while you pack your equipment for the trek.

"Who are these Archivists, anyway?" he asks excitedly.

"They're a cult. They call themselves Servants of the Eye because their insignia is a triangle with a single eye in the center. Archivists worship all artifacts made by the Ancients and guard them in their underground temples. The Nakitz temple has the largest collection of Ancient artifacts around here, and the sacred idol is just one of them."

"Are the Archivists dangerous?" asks Vik.

"They're not fanatics like the Red Death, but they can get very mad if someone tries to

steal their relics. It's the forest between here and there that's dangerous. Once we leave Olix and head west, we'll be on the fringe of the Forbidden Zone, where the death rays have made monsters out of normal plants and animals. That's why Sared wants us to take our weapons."

"But I don't have anything except this clumsy spear!" Vik protests. "I need a sword like yours!"

Your brother is always admiring the steel cutlass Toki gave you when you were initiated as a warrior of Olix. It's a rare relic of the last Social War, and you've become an expert with the blade. You glance around the hut and spot the machete that Toki was using to cut bamboo. Its wide blade has a razor edge, and it resembles your cutlass.

"Here's your sword!" you tell Vik, tossing him the machete in its leather sheath. "It's made of steel, and it's very sharp, just like my cutlass."

The ten-year-old boy grins and straps the knife to his side. You step outside the hut, with Vik on your heels. Sared is waiting in the gray dawnlight by the western path. His tall figure is clad in plastic armor, molded to fit his wiry body, and draped with wildcat skins. The Elder glares at you for being a little late.

"Come on. The sun's almost up, and we've lost half an hour!" Without waiting for a reply, he turns and walks rapidly away. You and Vik glance at each other with quick frowns and

rush after him into the wall of morning fog.

Within an hour, Sared has led you farther west than you've ever been. The flatlands start to roll gently, and the stubby pine trees give way to huge oaks and hickories. The trees, with their thick canopies, shade the ground so well that very little grass and few bushes can grow between them. All around you, the only sounds you hear are your own. It's impossible to walk quietly on the thick blanket of leaves and twigs.

"I'm tired!" calls Vik, startling you with the first words anyone has spoken. Sared stops in his tracks and twists his head toward the boy. From the fierce expression on his bearded face, you can tell that the warrior is not accustomed to traveling with a child.

"It's hard for Vik to keep up with us," you tell him, trying to defend your brother's weakness. "His legs are shorter, and he has to run just to stay in sight of us."

Sared grunts a word you don't understand and points to the left. "The Forbidden Zone's just over that hill. In case you haven't noticed, there are tracks all around us, and we need to get past this forest by nightfall!"

"What kind of tracks?" you exclaim. You haven't seen anything along the trail.

"Look right below your feet, under the leaves!" answers Sared.

You squat and brush away some leaves. In the middle of the trail, you see a footprint.

"It's a man!" cries Vik. "But why did he

cover up his prints with leaves?"

"It's not a human," says Sared. "The toes are wrong. We're in hound folk country, and that's the footprint of one of their scouts."

"Hound folk? You mean the dogmen with human bodies and the heads of wolves? But they're cannibals!" your brother cries.

"Right you are, young warrior!" says Sared. "Now do you feel rested?"

"Who's tired?" Vik answers nervously. "Let's go!"

As Sared smirks and turns away, you see a blur of motion behind a tree to your left.

"Wait!" you whisper. "There's something over there!"

"The scout!" mutters Sared. "He's seen us! We can't let him get back to his camp!"

You draw your cutlass and bound from the trail. The scout pokes his head from behind the tree, sending a chill through your body. The head has the snarling muzzle of a huge gray timber wolf, and it's protected by a studded leather cowl!

The dogman leaps away from the tree and runs on his human legs toward the crest of the hill. The creature's upper body is clad in the same studded armor, and he's clutching a spiked club in one humanoid hand. With a burst of speed, you try to close the gap between you and the monstrous mutant. You're almost near enough to strike when the dogman trips over a large root. He tumbles forward, crashing to the ground just in front of you!

You're running so fast that you can't stop. In the next moment, you plow into the mutant's fallen body, plunging your cutlass up under the leather armor into his hairy hide. The monster's vicious jaws snap twice at you, before his head flops limply to one side.

"I didn't mean to kill him!" you exclaim as Sared and Vik run to your side with their weapons drawn. "I wanted to question him!"

"He wouldn't have told you a thing," says Sared as he studies the creature's body. "Look at that tattoo! He's a zoopremisist!"

The Elder is pointing to a black ram's head tattooed on a shaved spot on the dogman's hairy chest. It's the symbol of the Animal Liberation Front, a secret cult of mutated animals who seek to destroy all humans!

"If they're this close to Olix, they probably plan to attack the village!" you exclaim. "We should try to find out how many of them are here and warn the Elders!"

"Have you forgotten your sister?" demands Sared. "Her life depends upon our getting the idol! We must not delay our mission!"

1) If you feel you must try to spy on the zoopremisists and warn your village, turn to page 121.

2) If you realize that you can't delay your quest to Nakitz for any reason, continue reading on page 14.

"All right," you decide briskly. "I accept your offer. But what about Sared?" you ask the Collector. "We can't just leave him alone on this road!"

"Don't worry about that crazy Seeker," says Rader. "He's too mean for anything to harm him. Besides, it'll be daylight in a couple of hours, and he'll be able to find his way back to Olix without any trouble."

You know the Elders will be furious if you desert the junior councillor, but you decide that Toki's life is more important than any punishment the Elders may try to force upon you.

"I have one condition, too," you tell the Collector. "I'll help you steal the idol if you'll take us back to Olix in the transport after we get it. We've already lost too much time."

"You didn't even need to ask," says Rader with a grin. "I was going to do that anyway. Let's get your brother into the backseat with Boxer and be on our way!"

Please turn to page 116.

Your brother's body is glowing with the strange green light, but he doesn't seem to have any cuts or broken bones. Still, he's hardly breathing, and you don't know what effects the ancient death rays have had upon him. You decide to camp in the cave where you saw the humanoid until Vik is strong enough to continue your trek to the Dark Bayou.

You lift Vik's small body and hoist him over your shoulder. As soon as you touch him, the pulsating glow stops. Then you retrieve his spear from the rim of the hole and carry your brother over the rubble toward the cave where the mutant human had hidden.

The flickering yellow light from the cavern's mouth guides you straight to the fallen wall. You're only a dozen yards away when a low growl makes you stop in your tracks. Three large shadowy forms are crouched on top of the concrete wall, just where you were standing only a few minutes ago!

You ease Vik's unconscious body to the rough ground and step in front of him with the spear. The growls and snarls from the top of the lighted shelter become louder. Suddenly, all three of the shapes leap to the ground into the shaft of yellow light.

"Podogs!" you exclaim aloud. They're mutant mastiffs the size of small ponies! These wild dogs roam such barren places as the Forbidden Zone, hunting by scent. They must have smelled you and the humanoid and tracked you to the shelter!

In the firelight, you can see their gleaming fangs dripping with saliva as they creep closer, ready to attack! You draw your cutlass with your free hand and prepare to meet their charge. You're concentrating so much on the podogs that you fail to notice that Vik is awake until he steps in front of you and begins walking toward the three monsters!

"Vik! Get back!" you shout, but your brother seems to be either deaf or in some kind of trance. At first, the podogs appear to be confused by the sight of an unarmed human boy stalking toward them. Then they crouch, ready to spring at him and tear him to ribbons with their massive jaws.

1) If you want to grab Vik and try to run from the podogs, turn to page 120.

2) If you decide to step in front of your brother and attack the monsters, turn to page 90.

3) If you think that Vik may be able to handle the podogs by himself, turn to page 111.

As you enter the gaping cavern, you see that everyone is being questioned by a tall woman dressed in a skintight scarlet uniform. The sacred symbol of the Archivists, a human eye in the center of a triangle, is emblazoned on her chest. Suddenly, you know what you must do about Vik's telepathic warning.

You burst from the line and rush to the woman, pointing your finger at Sared. "That man's a New Dawn agent!" you yell. "He wants to destroy the idol!"

The priestess leaps to her feet, motioning for her guards to surround the Elder. They have pistols of some ancient design in their hands and aim them at Sared. The Seeker glares in hatred and raises his battle mace to charge at you. At that moment, the guards fire their weapons, striking the Elder's armored body with dozens of direct hits.

Smoking black holes appear in Sared's plastic armor, killing the secret agent instantly. You watch the guards swarm over his body, searching every inch of it. One of them jerks a small pouch from beneath the armor and shows it to his commander.

"A damage pack, priestess!" he shouts. "Enough to blow up the whole temple!"

The woman grabs your arm and whirls you around to face her. "What do you know of this plot, Seeker?" she demands.

"I'm not a Seeker!" you reply. Then you tell the priestess why you've come to Nakitz. You hope that she will reward you for saving the

idol by letting you borrow it to heal Toki. Instead, she pushes you into the waiting arms of her guards.

"Arrest him and his brother!" she orders. Before you can reach for your cutlass, several rough hands grab the weapon and search you. You start to protest, but Vik's fearful telepathic voice stops you.

It's no use, Ard! They're convinced that we're Seekers of the New Dawn. The priestess is planning to execute us!

THE END

Vik is tied to a tree, seemingly staring straight ahead through the red cloth across his eyes. He hasn't moved a muscle since his captors stopped at the campsite. You wonder if he's ever going to be all right again.

With the blade of your cutlass, you slice the leather thongs easily, freeing your brother's hands. The boy doesn't seem to be aware that anything has happened. He just sits on the ground.

"Vik!" you whisper. "It's Ard! Can you hear me?"

When he still doesn't respond, you slit the blindfold with the sword. As it falls from his face, twin beams of green light stream from his eyes. He raises his gaze to your face, and the green light pours into your brain with a terrible pain! Before you can stifle it, a scream of agony bursts from your mouth!

You lurch away from your brother's powerful gaze, shielding your eyes with your hand. When you're able to overcome the pain in your head and look up, the two armored badders are rushing toward you, screeching and swinging their spiked clubs!

Still groggy from the strange power in Vik's eyes, you try to dodge blows from both creatures, but one strikes your right temple viciously.

You raise your cutlass in a feeble attempt to ward off the next attack, but the badders' heavy maces knock the sword from your weakened hand!

The evil mutants begin to pound you senseless with their cruel weapons. Your last thoughts are of Vik and Toki and of how you can be of no help to them—ever again.

THE END

You're starting to feel more and more distrustful toward the Collector. He might steal the idol without giving you a chance to use it to help Toki. "Thank you for getting my brother back to me," you suddenly tell Rader. "I'll take him off your hands now so that you can go about your business!"

Rader frowns slightly, then shrugs his shoulders. "Come on, Boxer," he calls to the robot. "Let's leave these two alone. I don't think they want our company any longer."

The Collector opens a hatch and helps Vik out of the low vehicle. You take your brother's arm and guide him to the edge of the road while the robot jams his bulky frame into the transport. Rader waves as he climbs into the driver's seat.

"Good luck with whatever you're doing, friend," he calls. "You really should be less suspicious, you know. Sometimes it pays to trust a stranger!" Without waiting for a reply, the Collector shuts the hatch, and the transport zips away in the darkness toward the south.

You wait until Vik is asleep again before you collapse to the ground in a deep slumber. The sun is high and hot when you wake, but your brother doesn't seem to have moved a muscle during the night.

You crawl to his side and shake him. "Wake up, Vik!" you call, hoping that sleep has restored his strength and energy. When the boy rolls over and opens his eyes, you're

thrilled to see that they're their normal brown color—no unusual glow at all.

Vik sits up and rubs his eyes, then stops with a surprised expression on his face. "You were thinking about my eyes!" he says quickly. "I could read every thought in your mind! My head feels funny, Ard!"

Strange changes in your brother's brain, caused by the rays he was exposed to, must have taken place while he slept. Not only can he read your thoughts, but he can also project his thoughts into your mind. Even before he spoke a word, you knew exactly what he was thinking!

"Get up, Vik! We've got to get to Nakitz as soon as possible. Maybe the idol can repair the damage to your brain!" Within minutes, you're hiking on the hot black azfall of the ancient highway toward the Archivists' sacred town.

Please turn to page 79.

When you see those same strange rays that hit you in the ruins now focused on the two giant serpents, you decide that Vik might be able to control the monsters without your help. You stand to the side with the spear raised, ready to strike if the boy's mysterious new powers fail.

Your brother is saying nothing, but you sense that he is communicating with the two monsters. Their hoods relax and droop so that the creatures don't appear so threatening.

You can put down my spear, Ard! Vik's voice suddenly appears in your mind.

"Who or what are these snakes with human arms?" you ask him aloud, noticing that his eyes still glow with the green light, but not as brightly.

They're called slime devils by humans, but they call themselves menarls, he answers without speaking. *Their ancestors were water snakes in the Forbidden Zone before the Social Wars. The death rays of the Ancients' bombs changed their brains and bodies, as you can see.*

"Do they know the way to the White Handers' village?" you ask.

Vik turns to the menarls and focuses his telepathic sight on them again. After a few seconds, his answer appears in your mind.

It's less than a mile away, on the trail where the podogs left us!

Your brother is so weak that he can hardly stand. You put an arm around his waist and

force him to stumble with you onto the trail. Behind you, the two menarls slither into a pool of black water so quickly that all you see of them when you glance back are their huge tails vanishing beneath the murky surface.

The trail leads you deeper into the bayou, where hanging moss drapes to the ground like thick curtains. You stumble along for hours, seeing the dawn's light slowly filter into the murky swamp. Vik is nearly unconscious by the time you smell the cooking fires of the Healers' village.

The White Handers have built their huts on thick poles rammed into the bank of a large pond. There are many long dugout canoes tied to the pilings beneath the huts, and thin streams of smoke curl from the hut porches into the treetops, merging to form a foggy canopy over the village.

In the center of the trail just ahead, two men dressed in spotless white robes are walking toward you. Their thick hair hangs below their shoulders, mingling with their curly beards so that their noses and eyes are the only visible portions of their faces. Below the beards, you can see a curious emblem sewn on the fronts of their robes. It's a winged staff with two intertwined serpents, the sacred symbol of the White Hand sect.

"Who are you, strangers?" one of them calls. "Why have you come to our community?"

"My name is Ard," you reply. "I'm a warrior from Olix. We came to the bayou to find a

Healer for our sister, but now my brother needs your secret arts as well! He fell through the ground in the Forbidden Zone and was exposed to the rays of the Ancients."

The two Healers look more closely at Vik and then whisper a few words between themselves in a language you don't understand.

"We are but nurzes of the White Hand," says the one who spoke before. "You must talk to Corlan, our patriarch. The rays of the zone are the deadliest secret of the Ancients, and only our wisest priest may be able to help your brother."

The silent Healer steps closer and motions for you to let go of Vik's waist. Then he cradles your brother gently with his arms, lifting him from the trail as if he weighed nothing at all. "Come, warrior of Olix," says his companion. "We shall take you to Corlan."

You follow the two nurzes to the largest hut in the village, a structure on stilts like the others but decorated with hundreds of mystical signs and symbols. A tall man with a shiny bald head and a silver-streaked beard greets you from the wide veranda.

"Welcome to our sacred housepittal," he says as you climb the steps behind the two nurzes. "I am Corlan, a doctor of the White Hand. What is wrong with the boy?"

You tell the chief Healer about Toki's injury and describe what happened to Vik.

"We can do nothing here for your sister, but I will examine your brother. Bring the child

inside," he instructs the nurzes.

Inside the large hut, the two nurzes place Vik's body on a shiny metal table in the center of a spacious room. The walls are lined with wooden shelves containing many curious objects, including hundreds of the rare, holy artifacts called buks by your people. They are like boxes containing thousands of sacred symbols and pictures printed on thin layers of plastic, but no one in Olix can understand their meaning.

Corlan takes a small square object from a shelf and touches some buttons on it. The metal box begins to hum, and a window in it lights up with a soft red glow. The sight of your brother lying helpless on the metal table while the doctor uses the powerful secrets of the Ancients makes you shiver. If only this man can heal both Vik and Toki! Finally, he turns the strange device off and returns it to the shelf.

"Your brother's brain was altered by the ancient rays," he reports. "He will remain weak for several days, but then he will be strong again."

"Why didn't the rays affect me?" you ask the Healer. "I was in the basement, too! I was bathed by them!"

"Because you are not a mutant like your brother," Corlan answers. "Pure strain humans are not changed when they encounter the Ancients' rays."

"How could Vik be a mutant?" you cry in

disbelief. "Mutants are monsters!"

"Not always, young warrior," the Healer replies. "Some mutations lie sleeping until the rays make them spring forth. It is hard to recognize a mutant like your brother, whose changes are only mental."

"But will his speech and hearing return?"

"Of course," answers Corlan. "In fact, those abilities will be much stronger than before because Vik will also be able to read minds and to project his own thoughts to any intelligent being. Your brother will become very powerful!"

"What about Toki?" you cry. "Will you come back to Olix with us and heal her?"

The Healer frowns and shakes his head. "I fear that your sister's injury is far more serious than you imagined. The metal splinter has already damaged her brain. Any Healer could remove the metal, but even I could not repair the harm it has done. There is only one hope for your sister. You must take her to the Archivist temple at Nakitz and ask their idol to heal her. Even then, I fear the trip to Nakitz might kill her!"

"Then I'll bring the idol of Nakitz to her!" you cry desperately.

"The Archivists will never let you take the sacred idol from their temple," Corlan says sadly. "I've asked them to bring it here to heal others who could not be moved, but they have always refused. I can show you a shortcut through the Dark Bayou to Nakitz and let you

ask the Archivists yourself, but I advise you to return to Olix at once and risk taking your sister to the idol. That is her only chance to live!"

1) If you believe Corlan is right and you must take Toki to Nakitz as soon as possible, turn to page 124.

2) If you feel you can get the idol from the Archivists' temple somehow, turn to page 83.

It's nearly dusk when you reach Nakitz. The seacoast town on the Gulf of Mecksgo is filled with thousands of mutant pilgrims, all hoping to be healed by the legendary idol. Everywhere you look, you see hideous humanoids with extra heads and limbs, furry snouts, scales, and even turtle shells. You learn that you must go to the temple and stand in line to see the idol. The Archivist priests decide who is to be healed by the sacred relic.

You follow the crowds to the temple and go to the end of the long line of cripples and mutants. You're beginning to think it'll be days before you can plead with the Archivists to borrow the idol. Then you see a woman clad in a tight uniform of red plastic leading a small group of men dressed in similar clothes. On each of their outfits is the design of a triangle with a human eye in the center. It's the sacred symbol of the Archivists.

This uniformed squad of temple guards is pulling people out of the line. When they near the end of the line, the woman notices you and Vik and signals her guards forward.

"What favors do you seek from the Holy Idol of Nakitz?" she demands.

Vik's wordless thought pops into your head: *She sees we're not deformed like the others and thinks we may be New Dawn agents!* The Seekers of the New Dawn are a cult of fanatics who aim to destroy all ancient artifacts.

"I'm a warrior from Olix, and this is my brother," you answer the woman quickly.

Then you explain why you've come to Nakitz. The Archivist priestess laughs and turns to her squad of guards.

"Did you hear? This fool wants to borrow the idol to heal his sister in Olix! Remove them from the temple grounds!"

Your fingers drop to the hilt of your cutlass, but Vik's telepathic voice stops you. *Don't! The guards have ancient weapons called slug-guns, and the men are all thinking they'd like to kill you!*

You step away from the men, pushing through the throng of pilgrims with Vik right behind you. The temple guards laugh as you leave the line, then continue their selection of those to be healed by the idol. You lead Vik to a distant corner and stand watching the pilgrims enter the huge cavern that serves as a shrine for the idol.

"Well, Boxer, look who's here!"

You jerk your head toward the familiar voice. Rader and his robot are standing in the street just behind you. The Collector has a shrewd grin on his tanned face.

"We saw what happened and heard everything, Ard. Are you ready for some help now?" The laughter of the priestess and the guards is still ringing in your ears, and you're feeling even more desperate about helping Toki. "How can we get the idol?" you ask the Collector decisively.

Please turn to page 56.

"I won't risk Toki's life by taking her over the rough forest trails to Nakitz!" you tell the chief priest of the White Hand. "I'll get the idol from the Archivists even if I have to steal it!"

Corlan's dark eyes cloud with sadness. "You must decide that for yourself," he says, "but I warn you again that the Servants of the Eye will do everything in their power to keep the idol in their temple."

"Thank you for your concern, Doctor, but my sister's life depends upon that statue. We must leave at once for Nakitz. Will you show us the shortcut you mentioned?"

"Of course," answers the Healer. "I shall also prepare a tea of secret herbs for your brother that will strengthen him for your perilous mission."

In less than an hour, Corlan has guided you to the eastern boundary of the Dark Bayou, where the swamp disappears and merges with a hilly forest. The Healer gives Vik a wineskin filled with a bitter liquid brewed from secret swamp herbs known only to the White Hand sect. The boy is already feeling stronger, and the tea soon makes his weakness vanish completely.

"Travel always to the east," says Corlan. "An ancient road runs north and south many hours from here. It will be dark when you reach it, but that is the quickest way to Nakitz. Head south on that road."

The forest paths from the Dark Bayou are

overgrown with briars and thick shrubs for the first several miles, forcing you to travel slowly. Finally, the pine thickets change to a deep forest of oaks and hickories whose huge canopies shade the ground so well that there is very little undergrowth. You can travel much faster, but Vik's herb tea is gone, and he has to rest more often.

Soon, the evening shadows grow heavier, and it becomes difficult to find your way. You stumble through the darkening woods until you can no longer see the ground. Each time you stop, you hear several heavy footsteps on the fallen leaves behind you. Some kind of large creature is following you, stopping each time you rest!

"Something's tracking us, Vik!" you murmur to your exhausted brother. "We need to move faster!"

The boy's telepathic reply is very weak. *I'm trying, Ard, but my legs are numb and my head hurts!* You put your arm around his waist and try to help him walk faster. Suddenly, Vik slumps against your side and slips to the ground, unconscious!

You drop to your knees over the boy, trying to wake him up, but he doesn't respond. Just then, a large figure looms from the deep shadows at your side. You roll away from Vik, drawing your cutlass at the same time. Your blade clanks against something metal, sending a painful vibration all the way to your shoulder before you realize what you've

attacked. Towering over you is a robot!

The humanoid machine has arms and legs like a man, but no head. Instead, the robot is crowned with a clear dome filled with hundreds of tiny, dancing lights. Suddenly, a panel opens on its chest, flooding everything around you with a dazzling light!

Blinded by the glare, you shield your eyes and try to swing your sword at the robot. Something metal wraps around your arm, twisting the weapon away from your grasp. Dropping your hand from your face, you see a pair of writhing tentacles extending from the creature's chest, your cutlass dangling from one of them!

"Don't try that again!" says a human voice from behind you. "Boxer's a security robot, and he might decide to protect himself in a more permanent way."

You jerk your head toward the speaker and see a tall man with close-cropped black hair stepping from the shadows into the robot's light. His blue plastic suit is so tight that every line of his muscular body is visible. The man also has a wide belt around his waist containing many strange objects, including a handgun of some ancient design.

"I'm sorry we startled you," says the man. "We've been following you ever since you entered the Red Death sector, just in case those fanatics tried to waylay you. These woods are dangerous at night, you know!"

"The Red Death!" you exclaim. "Those are

the killers who murdered my parents! I'd welcome a chance to meet them!"

"Well, if you hang around here a little longer, you'll get your wish," says the man with a grin. "I'm sure you're a good fighter, but there are too many of them in this area, even for my bodyguard, here. Right, Boxer?"

"Your statement is accurate, boss," the robot agrees in a normal human voice. "My sensors have detected many humanoid readings during the past two hours. As your bodyguard, I most firmly recommend that we summon the transport."

"There's still time for that," the man replies to the robot. He turns back to you and introduces himself. "My name's Rader. I'm a Collector. You know, a dealer in ancient artifacts. Boxer here was one of my first finds, and I just couldn't bear to sell him. I had to do a little work on his program, like teaching him to call me boss, but he's been worth the trouble. Now, what are you doing in these woods, and what's wrong with the boy?"

You're too confused by the strange man and his robot companion to keep silent. You tell him everything that has happened since Toki's accident, and report what the Healer said about Vik. Rader nods as if he knows what Corlan meant.

"I've seen this kind of thing before, and always with mutants," he says. "The White Hander was right. He'll be better than ever in a few days. But this thing about the idol is a

bit trickier. I'm interested in that little doodad myself. If you'll help me do a bit of digging in some ruins near Nakitz, I might be able to talk the Archies into a deal. You use the idol on your sister, and I keep it when you're through."

1) If you think Rader can be trusted to help you get the idol from the Archivists and you want to go with him, turn to page 151.

2) If you don't trust the stranger well enough to share the idol with him, turn to page 100.

The stranger in the ancient uniform seems friendly, and you need to do something to help Vik. You introduce yourself and tell him about Toki's accident and everything that has happened since then. He listens carefully to your story without interrupting. When you finish, he shakes his head and smiles.

"Is that all?" he asks with a grin. "It's quite a tale. By the way, I'm Rader. I'm a Collector. And my mechanical friend here is called Boxer." He turns to the robot. "Did you hear that, Boxer? The boy tried to fight a gamma bush! No wonder he's in a daze!"

"What's a gamma bush?" you ask the man.

"Some folks call it a perth. It's a plant that feeds on gamma rays left over from the Social Wars," he answers. "The rays are what make the blossoms glow this time of year. Whenever the plant is disturbed, the blossoms discharge some of the radiation. It's not too dangerous to humans, but mutants like your brother are very sensitive to gamma rays."

"Vik's not a mutant!" you protest.

"Sure he is!" says Rader. "I checked his eyes when Boxer put him in the transport. They're shining with the same colors as the gamma bush! Mutants store the rays just like the plant does. When your brother gets stronger, his brain will be changed, too."

"What do you mean?" you demand.

"Usually the mutant can read minds and project his own thoughts," says Rader. "We won't know for sure about your brother until

he comes out of that trance."

"But will he be able to make it to Nakitz?" you ask. "I've got to get the idol for Toki before she dies!"

Please turn to page 125.

Your brother seems too dazed to hear your shouts. You hurl his spear at the nearest podog, hitting its haunch. The injured beast howls with pain, causing the other two giant mastiffs to turn from Vik to you.

Holding your cutlass at arm's length, you step in front of your silent brother and wait for the podogs to spring. From one side, the wounded monster rushes in a maddened frenzy to attack you.

You hack at the beast's neck with your cutlass, severing its spine. Even before the animal's corpse hits the ground, the other two podogs are on top of you, snapping at your throat. You manage to club one of them with the steel fistguard of your cutlass, stunning the creature for a moment and giving yourself time to wriggle away.

Instead of backing up, you charge toward the mutant mastiffs with a loud war cry. Your razor-edged sword zings in the night air as it descends onto the shoulder of the unhurt monster. Your blow cripples the beast, giving you time to switch your attention to the one you had stunned a moment earlier.

It has recovered from your attack and is leaping for your sword arm. You dodge its lunge and jab your cutlass upward, catching the vicious podog in the chest. The impaled monster dies instantly as the tip of your blade pierces its heart, but its weight presses you to the ground.

You scramble from under the dead beast and

rush the one with the wounded shoulder. The remaining podog hobbles into the shadows with its tail between its legs, yelping and howling like a puppy.

You watch the limping mutant until it's out of sight. Then you turn to Vik with a grin—but the boy is gone! In the dusty rubble, you see his footprints returning toward the ancient basement with its deadly rays! You quickly pick up the spear, sheath the cutlass, and race into the darkness after him.

Suddenly, a bright torch flares in the ruins just ahead, then two more! You drop to your knees on the rough stones and creep forward until you can see the source of the flames.

Please turn to page 18.

The stranger and the robot don't appear to be hostile, although their ancient weapons are much more powerful than yours. You've never seen anything like the force that knocked your brother and Sared to the ground, and you don't know how to help them.

"All right!" you call, sheathing the cutlass. "I won't attack you unless you force me to defend myself!"

"Spoken like a true warrior, and a wise one!" the man answers. "Find some more wood for that fire, Boxer. And cut that energy screen off before you kill somebody!"

"It was not my fault, boss," says the robot in an apologetic voice. "You designed my defense program yourself. The screen just clicked on when the angry human hit me."

"Yes, yes, I know! It's always a human error! Just go get the wood, Boxer, and skip the back talk!"

The robot's brain lights sparkle and blink for a moment before the mechanical creature wanders into the darkness to find firewood. Its "boss" walks toward you and your unconscious companions, shaking his head.

"Good help's hard to find, as the Ancients used to say! Sometimes I wish I'd never resurrected that walking junkyard." The man stops his lighthearted comments when he sees the confused look on your face.

"Sorry, friend. The name's Rader. I'm a Collector, what some people call a junker. I poke around in these old ruins for anything the

bombs didn't smash, and sell what I don't want to folks like the Archies—Archivists, that is. By the way, you've got a fine cutlass there. Late Social War relic, I'd guess. Right?" You nod, but glance worriedly at your brother.

"Oh, yes, the victims of Boxer's energy shield. Don't worry, friend. It was just a little wave of antimatter particles that shorted their neurons. The higher centers of their brains just shut down for a while."

"What does that mean?" you demand.

"In simple terms, they're asleep. I'll check the boy because he took a bigger charge." Rader bends over Vik's head and gently lifts his eyelids. Both Vik's eyes are glowing with the same blue light you saw envelop his body!

"My, my," says the Collector. "A genuine mental mutant! I haven't seen one in months."

"Vik's no monster!" you protest. "He's my brother, and I'm not a mutant, either!"

Rader looks at you and smiles. "Take it easy," he soothes. "Mutants aren't all bad, you know. And they pop up in the best of families! The only ones most people recognize are those with two heads, or turtle shells, or any other kind of physical change. Those like your brother have mutated brains, which change only when they're exposed to high energy waves, like Boxer's screen."

Rader's explanation is difficult to understand, but he sounds knowledgeable. "Will Vik be all right?" you ask him.

"Sure!" says the Collector. "He'll be weak

for a while, and act like a robot with no program, but then his new brain circuits will stabilize and he'll be better than new!"

"Why do you say better?" you ask Rader.

"What usually happens is that a mental mutant develops some kind of telepathic ability, like mind reading or thought projection. Vik'll probably be able to talk without opening his mouth."

You suddenly remember your mission and wonder how much of a delay Vik's injury will mean. The Collector must have seen a change in your expression because he leans a little closer and puts a hand on your shoulder.

"What's the problem?" he asks softly. "I might be able to help if you'd tell me what's bothering you. I know a lot of people in these backwoods."

You're beginning to like Rader, and decide to trust him with your plan to take the idol back to Olix. You tell him everything that has happened since Toki's accident and ask him what you should do now that Vik has been injured.

"That's no problem," says the Collector. "I've got some medicine that'll fix him in no time. It's the Archies you need to worry about! I've never seen the idol myself, but I've heard enough about it to know they'll be guarding it night and day. And I've never known an Archivist who'd loan an artifact to anyone. Trade, maybe; but loan, never!"

"What can we do?" you cry. "Toki's nearly dead! I've got to bring that idol back!"

"I just might be able to help you, Ard!" says Rader. "That idol interests me, too. If it can do everything people claim, it's worth a fortune! We stand a better chance of getting it if we work together. I've got a transport car that will get you to Nakitz a lot faster than walking will. Here's my offer, Ard. We help each other get the idol away from the Archies. Then you use it to save your sister's life, and I keep it when you're through with it."

"I don't think the Elders would ever approve of that," you tell the Collector, "and Sared here would know about it."

"Oh, I almost forgot my one condition," adds Rader. "That crazy Seeker stays here."

"Seeker! Do you mean the New Dawn sect that seeks to destroy all Ancient artifacts?"

"That's right!" says Rader. "I knew he was a New Dawn Seeker the minute he rushed Boxer. I've seen a lot of those fanatics in my line of work. So, you see, your Elders won't have to know about it until it's done!"

1) If you agree to Rader's terms and want to work together to take the idol from Nakitz, turn to page 63.

2) If you don't like the Collector's proposed deal and decide to go on as you had planned, turn to page 22.

The sight of the Red Death terrorists sitting comfortably around their camp fire eating roasted meat makes you flush with anger. This is the same cult of fanatical murderers that killed your mother and father years ago! They kidnap young children like Vik and force them to swear death to all living things outside their sect!

Your rage is too powerful to contain. With your brother's spear in one hand and your steel cutlass in the other, you charge from the shadows. Your bloodcurdling scream takes the terrorists completely by surprise.

The three humanoids are too shocked to move from their places by the fire. You sink your spear into one's chest, pinning him to the ground. Before the other two can escape, you injure them both badly with your cutlass. You glance around quickly, looking for the badders, but the mutant animals have vanished.

Please turn to page 68.

Vik's telepathic warning about Sared rings in your mind. If he destroys the idol, Toki will die! Just as you enter the huge cavern of the Archivists' shrine, you grab the Elder's arm and twist him toward you.

"I know who and what you are, Seeker!" you whisper. "If you try what you've come here to do, I'll cut your throat!"

Sared's eyes widen with a crazed, glassy stare when he realizes that you've discovered his plot. The Elder pushes you away with a violent burst of strength and dashes into the temple amid the curses and screams of the mutants in line.

You've taken only a few steps after him when a powerful explosion knocks you to the floor of the cavern. You struggle to move, but the panic-stricken mob of monstrous pilgrims pile on top of your helpless body. Seconds later, tons of rock blasted loose from the cavernous ceiling end your quest for the idol of Nakitz, which might have saved your sister's life.

THE END

"Come on, friend," says the Collector. "The Red Death won't wait much longer for you to make up your mind!" He turns to his robot. "Better call the transport, Boxer!"

"It's on the way, boss," answers the robot.

You look at Vik's small body curled up near the metal humanoid's feet and know that you have to get him away from the Red Death killers.

"We'll go with you," you tell Rader, "but only to the Nakitz road. My sister's life is in danger, and the Archivists may not help me if I'm with a Collector."

Many people regard Collectors as thieves who are willing to do anything to get their hands on ancient artifacts. You know that they sell such things to the highest bidder, and suspect that Rader might try to do the same with the idol.

"I'm not that kind of Collector!" says Rader, with a hint of anger in his voice. "I like to work and play with the things I find. I'm interested in learning the Ancients' secrets from their toys. But I won't argue with you. It's your sister, and you have to do whatever you think is best. Anyway, here's the transport!"

A low, sleek machine of some kind is skimming through the forest only inches above the ground, coming toward you so fast that you think it may pass you. The vehicle whisks to a smooth stop right beside the robot, its cabin lights flashing on as soon as it arrives.

"Get the boy in the back!" orders Rader, who

is already running for the driver's seat. The robot lifts Vik's unconscious body and lays him gently in the rear of the transport. Then he climbs in beside your brother.

"Are you waiting for an invitation?" calls the Collector. You run to the other front hatch and climb into the seat beside Rader. He presses a few buttons, and the strange vehicle zips into the dark forest.

You glance back at Vik and see that he's beginning to breathe more normally, as if he were just asleep. "He'll be all right," mumbles Rader. "Let him rest, and try to get some sleep yourself. You've got a long way to walk tomorrow. Don't worry—I'll wake you up when we reach the southern highway!" he adds.

You fall asleep watching the blur of the trees outside the fast vehicle. The next thing you're aware of is Rader's hand on your shoulder. You sit up and see that it's already past dawn. The transport is stopped in the middle of a wide black strip extending as far as you can see in front of the vehicle.

"All out for a hike to Nakitz," says the Collector, "unless you've changed your mind."

"Where are we?" asks Vik's sleepy voice from the backseat. Then he spots the robot, and his eyes widen in surprise long enough for you to see that the strange light is gone from them.

"Relax, Vik," you tell your brother. "This is Rader, and that's Boxer beside you. They helped us escape from the Red Death while

you were unconscious. I'll tell you all about it on the road to Nakitz."

You climb out of the transport and help Vik out. Then you walk around the sleek vehicle to Rader's side and shake his hand. "Thanks for the help, and for the ride," you say. "Maybe we'll have a chance to talk again sometime. I'd like to learn more about the Ancients, but right now I'm too worried about my sister."

The Collector grins and points straight ahead. "If you start walking, you might make it to Nakitz by nightfall," he says. "It doesn't matter when you get there, though. I understand that the temple never closes. Good luck with the idol! Oh, by the way, I DO understand about your sister, and I'm sure we'll have another chance to talk!"

The Collector starts the quiet engine of the transport and waves. In seconds, the vehicle is only a dot on the horizon. As you and Vik begin the final trek to Nakitz, you start telling him everything that happened while he was unconscious.

Please turn to page 79.

"Let's do it the easier way," you tell Rader. "I don't care about the danger. I just want to be sure we get the idol. Toki's life depends on it!"

"Good!" says the Collector. "The first thing we have to do is find a way to be alone with the idol long enough to let Boxer take its place. The Archivists watch it like hawks. Let me do the talking. I know how to deal with these fanatics!"

The four of you approach the entrance to the cavern without having to push your way through the crowd. As soon as the superstitious mutants see Boxer's metal body, they mutter in fear and part from your path. The priestess in the scarlet uniform meets you at the mouth of the shrine.

"Why are you back?" she asks suspiciously. "Which of you requires healing?"

"All of us!" answers Rader. "We wish to worship the idol alone for five minutes."

"That's quite impossible," says the priestess. "No one may view the idol in private. There have been too many attempts by New Dawn Seekers and others to destroy it."

"Perhaps we could demonstrate our devotion with an offering to the idol and to its servants," Rader suggests. The shrewd Collector points to Boxer with a charming smile.

"This machine is a faulty scale model of your idol that I have been building for several years. It has been a labor of love, priestess, a personal sacrifice for the idol and its noble guardians. If you'll grant us permission to

study the idol for only a few minutes, I should be able to correct my robot's faults and donate this fine working model to the Servants of the Eye—but only if you promise me to guard it personally!"

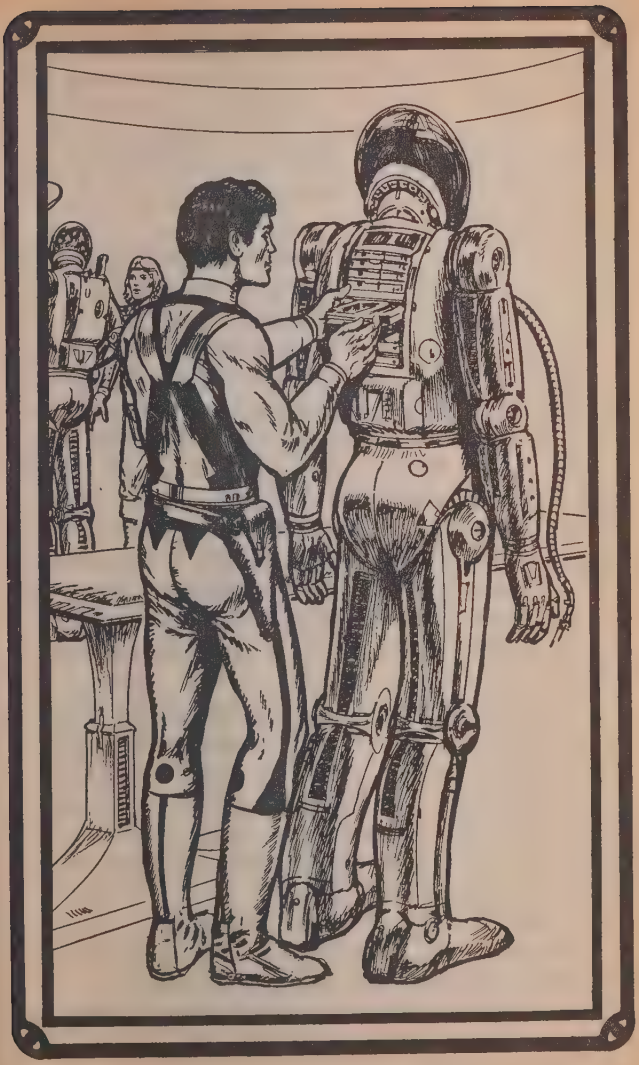
You see that the priestess is impressed with Rader's lie. She glances quickly at the guards standing by the inner door and leans closer to the Collector.

"I'm sure an exception can be made in this case," she says with a sly smile. Then she calls the guards away from the door and opens it for you and your companions. "I'm going to bolt this door from the outside," she says, "so that no one will disturb you."

"Perfect!" exclaims Rader. "My work of art will be in fine hands!" As soon as the door shuts, you grin at the Collector and start to congratulate him. "Not yet," he says. "We've got to hurry. There's the idol!"

In the center of the large round room, you see a robot almost identical to Boxer. The machine is standing beside a wide metal table, which must be where it works on patients. Rader walks behind the idol and opens a panel in its back. Inside it, you can see hundreds of small wires and little square objects.

"These are the circuits for its legs," he tells you. "They're in even better shape than Boxer's! I guess being worshipped for several hundred years is good for a robot. Now, let's see if the card works!"



The Collector pulls a purple square of plastic from his tunic and inserts it into a slot just below the robot's brain dome. "It's reading the data on the card to see if I'm authorized to give it instructions," Rader tells you. "We'll know in a matter of seconds if this plan has a chance of working!"

Suddenly, the idol's brain begins to flash like Boxer's! The card worked!

"We've got it!" you whisper.

"Not yet," says Rader. "We've still got to station poor Boxer in its place. Come here, old man! You're about to become an idol!"

"Is this absolutely necessary, boss?" asks Boxer. "Isn't there some way I could come with you and your friends?"

"I'm afraid not, buddy," answers Rader. "Be a good idol and just stay still for a few days. I'm going to switch off your command circuits and set up your defense screen so that nobody can do anything funny to you until we come back for you!"

Boxer waits until the idol moves aside. Then he takes its place behind the metal table. Rader repositions his robot's arms and tentacles so that he looks more like the idol, and finally presses a button on Boxer's back. A light blue aura surrounds the robot but soon fades and becomes invisible.

"Is that it?" you ask the Collector.

"Let's hope so!" he replies. "Knock on the door and see if we can get out of here."

The guards respond to your signal and let

you back into the cavern. The priestess is waiting impatiently to talk to Rader again.

"I have wonderful news!" exclaims the Collector as soon as he sees the woman. "My young assistants and I have solved the problem! We're going to work on this model's circuits all night and have it ready to dedicate to the temple by tomorrow!"

You see that Rader's trick has completely fooled the priestess. She only nods and stares greedily at the robot as you wave good-bye and leave the cavern. Within minutes, you're speeding north toward Olix in Rader's vehicle, with the famous idol of Nakitz that will save Toki's life.

Your heart is pounding with anxious joy. "I'll never forget what you've done, Rader," you tell the Collector. "Without your help, we wouldn't have been able to heal Toki!"

Rader laughs and claps your shoulder. "It's not over yet, Ard. As soon as this thing fixes your sister, we've got to go back for Boxer. Who knows—we might even figure out a way to keep the idol, too!"

THE END

Before the robot can decide where you've gone, you hurl Vik's spear at the glassy dome, hoping to smash the machine's sensors so that you can get away. Your aim is perfect, but the heavy stone tip just shatters against the robot's brain shield.

The robot reacts quickly to your attack, grabbing a short rod of some kind from its waist with a tentacle. You start climbing higher in the tree, but the rod suddenly telescopes toward you and touches your leg. Instantly, a paralyzing shock spreads over your entire body! Your hands slip from the limbs of the tree, and you tumble stiffly toward the ground. The last thing you feel before blacking out is the grasp of a powerful pair of arms!

Please turn to page 126.

"Just relax," says the man, seeing that you're confused by his ancient clothing, the robot, and the strange vehicle. "I'm not a ghost from the Social Wars or anything like that. My name's Rader, and I'm a Collector. That's how I got these antiques."

The stranger's introduction worries you even more. You've heard about these loner soldiers of fortune who poke around in ancient ruins for weapons, robots, and other prewar artifacts. Some people say that they'd do just about anything to get new artifacts. Others claim that Collectors know more about the Ancients than anyone else, including the Archivists, who never use their relics.

Please turn to page 71.

You force the flaming torch into the thick soil of the forest floor, instantly plunging the trail into blackness. Your eyes, however, are still blinded by the glare of the torchlight when the onrushing creature bursts into the clearing behind you!

With the swift reflexes of a trained warrior, you whip your cutlass around to meet the charging figure. Even before your eyes adjust themselves to the darkness, you feel your steel blade strike yielding flesh. Your victim cries out with pain and drops to the ground at your feet. You raise the cutlass to strike a death-blow, only to drop the weapon when you make out the disbelieving face of the small boy you've attacked. It's Vik!

Your brother must have followed you from Olix and gotten lost in the deep woods. When he saw your torch, he ran toward it, right onto your sword!

"Vik! Can you talk?" you cry, kneeling by his head.

"Ard, I . . . I . . ." Your brother's head slumps to the side, the painful expression wiped from his young face. You feel for his wrist, finding a weak, irregular pulse. Then you stop the bleeding from his small chest and cover him with your fur cloak. It will be days before you can safely move Vik and carry him back to Olix. You can only hope that both he and Toki will still be alive by then!

THE END

You stand still for a moment, becoming aware that Vik is apparently having some strange effect on the podogs. The monsters are no longer snarling at your brother. Suddenly, two beams of bright green light stream from Vik's eyes and spread over the huge muzzle of the largest mastiff! The creature's ears flatten against its brutish skull, and the podog lies down at the boy's feet!

Vik glances quickly at the two smaller mutant dogs, controlling them, too, with the strange green light from his eyes. The rays in the ancient basement must have altered your brother's brain somehow, giving him a telepathic power over these vicious beasts!

That's right, Ard. I can talk to them with my mind, just as I'm doing with you now!

Your brother's voice appears in your head, although you're sure he hasn't said anything! Vik is using the same mysterious mental power to communicate with you that he used to calm the wild podogs.

"Can you hear me, Vik?" you ask him quickly. "Are you all right?"

Once more, his answer forms in your mind without your hearing it. *I can't really hear you, but I can read your thoughts,* thinks Vik. *I feel very weak, and I can't speak. It's almost as if all my strength is focused in my mind and my eyes!*

"Then we need to return to Olix! You can't finish the trek to the Dark Bayou!"

You're wrong, Ard, Vik replies without

speaking. *We have to find a Healer for Toki! Maybe the White Handers can help me, too.*

You start to tell the boy that he's too weak to continue the dangerous journey through the Forbidden Zone, but he interrupts your thoughts with his own.

The podogs will carry us to the bayou. They'll do whatever I command them to do!

As if they understood Vik's unspoken words, the giant mastiffs get on their feet and approach you with their tails wagging. The mutant dogs are as gentle as ponies, two of them holding still for you and Vik to climb onto their backs. The extra podog waits until you're mounted and then trots into the shadows.

That one's our scout, Vik thinks into your mind. *It'll guide us around the more dangerous ruins in the zone."*

The beast you're riding bounds after the first podog, followed closely by Vik's mount. You lean forward, clutching the animal's fur in one hand and your brother's spear in the other. The huge mastiffs seem to see in the dark, leaping smoothly over piles of stone and twisted metal. Within an hour, you see a dark line on the horizon.

"There!" you shout to your brother. "The Dark Bayou!"

The podogs slow down at the outer edge of the Forbidden Zone, where the barren rubble merges suddenly with the moss-draped trees and grass of the swamp. Their keen night

vision and sense of smell allow them to move swiftly into the dismal, misty jungle, following trails invisible to human eyes.

After another hour of riding, the mutant beasts stop in the middle of a wide path and begin to sniff the ground excitedly. Vik's mount turns its head to the boy as if it wants to tell him something.

The podogs think this is the trail to the Healers' village, your brother says mentally. *They've also caught a scent of meat and want to chase it because they're hungry.*

You notice that Vik's thought waves seem weaker and see that the boy is having to lean on the mastiff's back to keep from falling off his mount.

"Good!" you exclaim, sliding off your wild steed. "We both need to rest before we go any farther."

You help Vik dismount and lead him toward a soft patch of moss near a tree so that he can be comfortable. The three podogs start baying like hounds and race into the dense jungle, their huge feet splashing through shallow pools of swamp water.

Without warning, Vik pulls his hand from yours with a powerful jerk. You whirl around and see him running away.

"Vik! Come back!" you shout as the swirling mists hide your brother's fleeing figure. You bound into the dense fog after him, surprised to find that the swamp ground is solid enough to walk on without sinking. "Vik! Where are

you? Answer me!" you call, but the bayou is silent and still.

You stop and listen for the boy's running footsteps, but hear nothing. Inching forward, you peer through the thick fog for a sign of movement. Suddenly, you notice three dark shapes just ahead—and one of them is Vik! You creep closer with your brother's spear raised, ready to protect him from whatever monstrous creatures have crawled into the swamp from the Forbidden Zone.

As the haze shifts, you see your brother standing in front of two giant, hooded snakes, each with two rows of humanoid arms and hands! Both monsters are poised cobralike, with flared hoods, ready to strike. Your brother is staring at them with a steady gaze, his eyes bathing their intelligent faces with twin beams of throbbing green rays!

1) If you trust your instinctive impulse to attack the snake creatures, turn to page 136.

2) If you wait to see if Vik can handle the monsters with the strange rays from his eyes, turn to page 73.

By the time Rader starts steering the transport past streams of pilgrims walking along the ancient azfall highway, Vik is stirring in the backseat. He raises his head and jerks away from Boxer's side when he sees the metal humanoid.

"Relax, Vik!" you tell the boy. "This man and his robot are our friends, and they're going to help us get the idol back to Olix." You quickly tell your brother everything that has happened and point to the lines of pilgrims outside the transport. "Those must be mutants and cripples headed for the temple to be healed. We're in Nakitz!"

The throng of disfigured creatures walking on the road scatters as Rader slows the transport. Many of them cover their faces and make superstitious signs with their hands as the sleek vehicle of the Ancients whisks by them. Their monstrous bodies are the mutated effects of ancient technology, and they seem to fear Rader's transport as an evil thing.

"Nakitz is always full of mutants," says the Collector. "Only a few of them are ever admitted to the temple, but those who are, are always completely healed. I once saw a woman with the shell of a crab, claws and everything, go into the temple—and come out with a perfect female body! Whatever the idol is, it works!"

"Who decides which of these miserable people get in to see the idol?" asks Vik.

"The Archivist priests and priestesses,"

Rader answers. "Some say that you have to slip them some money, while others claim they'll accept ancient artifacts for the privilege. If we can get the idol out of the Archivists' control, I'd like to offer its services to anybody who requests healing—after we use it on Toki, of course!"

For the first time, you see that Rader has more on his mind than just curiosity or profit. "Some Collectors may be greedy, but this one isn't!" you think.

I agree, Vik suddenly says inside your head!

You jerk around toward the backseat and see that he has a mischievous grin on his face. "I guess I'll have to be careful with my thoughts around you," you think.

That's up to you, big brother! he replies silently.

"Here's the temple!" says Rader, interrupting your telepathic conversation. The transport stops in front of a huge cavern decorated with the sacred symbol of the Archivist cult—a large triangle enclosing a single human eye. A long line of mutant pilgrims extends as far as you can see!

"Do we have to stand in that line?" cries Vik. "It'll be days before we see the idol!"

"Standing in line doesn't always work, either," says Rader. "Watch that squad of temple guards!"

You look where he's pointing and see a small cluster of men led by a tall, beautiful woman. They're all dressed in skintight red plastic

uniforms, much like Rader's blue one, with the triangle-and-eye emblem on their chests. The woman is leading the guards along the line of pilgrims, asking what each supplicant has to offer to the idol.

A pitiful six-armed old man with hard insect skin fumbles beneath his cloak and hands the priestess a small purse. The woman laughs and dumps the few coins onto the ground as her guards pull the mutant out of the line. Then she passes on to the next pilgrim.

"That's why I don't feel guilty about taking that idol," murmurs Rader. "Wait here. I've got to strike a bargain with that lady!"

The Collector bounds out of the transport and walks quickly toward the priestess and her guards. The handsome adventurer waves to her, motioning for her to step away from the others so that they can talk privately.

The woman studies the tall Collector in his ancient uniform for a moment, then approaches him. You can see their heads bend together as Rader whispers something to her. He takes a small object from his utility belt and passes it to her very quickly.

"The boss just gave her the alpha enhancer we found yesterday," says Boxer.

"What's that?" asks Vik.

"The Ancients called them dream machines. They stimulate alpha waves in the human brain, letting the users daydream while they're awake. We robots never understood the attractions of such toys, but our mas-

ters seemed to enjoy them. They're quite addictive for humans, I understand."

You watch as the priestess motions to her guards to let Rader pass into the temple. Less than ten minutes later, he comes out with a broad grin on his face and trots briskly to the transport.

Please turn to page 56.

Your brother doesn't react to your shout, so you leap forward and grab his arm.

"RUN!" you scream, startling the podogs and sending them back into the shadows for a moment. You twist Vik's shoulders around to try to wake him from the strange trance. Your brother's eyes suddenly flare with the same greenish glow you saw in the basement ruins. An intense beam of the mysterious rays streams from his eyes into yours!

You feel a shock wave of pure energy blast inside your brain, and your legs collapse beneath you. Shielding your head with your arms, you try to struggle to your feet, but your knees won't hold your weight.

You barely hear the snarling podogs or feel their crushing jaws as they pounce from the darkness upon you and your brother!

THE END

"I am thinking of Toki," you tell Sared, "and of everybody else in Olix! If we don't warn them about the zoopremisists, those crazy animals will wipe out the whole village!"

The Elder frowns, but agrees. "Very well, then. Let's try to backtrack the dogman, but only far enough to spy on his friends. I don't want to jeopardize our mission to Nakitz!"

"Good! Let's not get separated. Vik, stay close to me and keep your machete ready!"

The three of you check the ground for the mutant canine's tracks. Your brother is the first to spot the large footprints.

"Here they are! Headed toward all those trees!" The dogman's trail leads down a wooded slope to a dark thicket running along the foot of a hill.

"Their camp must be in those deep woods," you murmur. "Let's get closer!"

You move as quietly as you can down the slope, dodging from tree to tree and working your way to the edge of the thicket. You peer into the deep shadows ahead, hearing nothing but the loud sound of rushing water.

"It's too quiet," whispers Sared. "There should be birds and other animals moving around, but I don't hear a thing."

"Perhaps that noisy creek is covering up their sounds," you suggest. "Anyway, we have to follow these tracks. Let's go!"

You slip into the darker shadows of the thick woods, feeling the stillness close in around you. The dogman's tracks seem to head

straight for the stream of water, following a well-used trail. In the soft, damp earth, you recognize other pawprints—cougar, giant raccoon, bear—and the creatures that made them were all walking on two legs!

"This must be one of the zoopremisists' main trails," whispers Sared. "I've never seen so many of their signs in one place!" He's pointing to a ram's head carved in the bark of a huge oak tree on your right, and to other strange carvings along the side of the path.

"Maybe we ought to leave the trail," Vik mutters. "We might run right into some of those monsters!"

"No," says Sared. "They know more about the woods than anyone. We have a better chance on the trail, where we can see them."

You continue toward the creek bottom, studying the ground and the sides of the trail carefully for signs of a trap. A slight scraping noise from above is the only warning you have before a huge net of woven vines drops from the trees, entangling all three of you!

"Cut the net!" you yell, hacking at the woody fibers with your cutlass. But it's too late. The trail fills with lionmen and mutant cougaroids, who drop from the trees and begin to club you as you struggle helplessly inside the net.

THE END

Corlan's words make you feel even more desperate. If the Healer is right, there's only one slim chance to help Toki. You must return to Olix and try to take her over the rough trails to Nakitz without killing her!

"We'll do as you say, Corlan," you tell the chief priest of the White Hand. "Can you stand the trek back to Olix, Vik?"

Your brother slips from the table to the floor of the hut and stands on wobbly legs. *Sure,* he thinks into your mind. *I'm getting stronger every minute.*

"The boy must rest often along the way," says Corlan. "I can give him some tea made from secret herbs that will help him withstand the journey through the swamp."

Within minutes, the Healer has escorted you both from the housepittal to the northern edge of the White Hander village. Vik has a wineskin filled with the Healer's secret herbal medicine and is already feeling stronger. You thank the doctor and begin to retrace your steps to the east, toward Olix.

It is late in the day when you leave the Dark Bayou and start to recognize the trees and shrubs near your home village. Vik's tea is gone, and the boy has grown weak again, forcing you to stop every few hundred yards to let him rest.

Please turn to page 149.

"I've been thinking about that idol, too!" says Rader. "I told you I'm a Collector—what some people call a junk dealer. I find ancient artifacts, like Boxer and the transport here, and fix them, either to keep or sell. I know as much about old gadgets as anybody, and that idol interests me. My guess is that it's some kind of machine. If you and your brother let me help, I think we just might be able to sneak it out of the temple."

"I'm a warrior, not a thief!" you cry.

"Don't be so touchy!" he replies. "The Archivists don't really know anything about artifacts. They just use their secret powers to help their friends. If that idol is what I think it is, it can save a lot of lives, including your sister's! You already said you're prepared to raid Nakitz for it."

"What would you get out of it?" you ask the Collector suspiciously.

"The idol!" he exclaims. "You get your sister's recovery, and I get a new toy when you're through with it! When I'm tired of playing with it, I can sell it back to the Archies!"

1) If you think Rader's help would make it easier to steal the idol, turn to page 43.

2) If Rader sounds too eager to get the idol into his own hands, turn to page 71.

When you regain consciousness, you're lying on the ground by a camp fire. You slowly turn your aching head toward the light.

A tall, muscular human dressed in a tight blue plastic suit is seated on a log near the fire. You've never seen clothes like his before, but they remind you of pictures of the Ancients from the ruins near Olix. He's a beardless human around twenty-five years old. He's wearing a belt like the robot's and has a strange gun aimed right at your head!

"You can sit up, but not too quickly," the man says in a confident voice. "This is a laser pistol in my hand. How many of you crazy Reds are out here?"

" 'Reds'? Do you mean the Red Death?" you demand. "I'm not one of those murderers! They killed my parents when I was a boy! And now they've got my brother!"

"Tell me more," your captor says calmly. "Boxer tracked you from the Red Death sector. How did you get there?"

In a flurry of words, you tell the man who you are and everything that has happened since Toki was injured. "So that's why I was running away from the Red Death camp," you conclude. "I only want to find the way to Olix so that I can bring enough warriors back to rescue my brother! I might have made it, too, if that hunk of metal hadn't stopped me!"

"That 'hunk of metal' is a fine prewar security robot, my young friend," he says. "Boxer's my personal bodyguard and the only com-

pletely trustworthy creature I know. He's almost as powerful as a cyborg supervisor, you know, and they were the best humanoid robots of their time!"

You don't know anything about these ancient machines, but the robot certainly seems powerful. "Who are you? How do you know about these things?" you ask the man. "And could you point that gun somewhere else?"

"Sorry," he answers, returning the weapon to its holster. "The name's Rader. I'm a Collector—I make my living finding and trading stuff like robots."

"Listen, Rader," you demand boldly, "will you help me rescue my brother? For all I know, he may be dying from the effects of the green rays he absorbed in that basement!"

Rader shakes his head at your last sentence. "From what you've said and from what I've heard about others exposed to the rays, your brother should be fine. But those rays will make some interesting changes in him, Ard. When he recovers from the radiation, he'll be able to read minds and project thoughts to any intelligent creature, including machines!"

"But why didn't the rays do the same thing to me when I went into the basement?"

"Because your brother's a mutant!" answers the Collector. "Pure strain humans like you or I have developed a resistance to those old rays, but mutants like Vik are changed in some way every time they absorb any radiation!"

Abruptly, Rader stands, cutting off your confused thoughts about the strange things he's just told you. "That's enough talk for now," he says. "We need to get your brother away from those insane killers!"

Without waiting for a response from you, the man tells the robot to take you both to the terrorists' campsite. You have to trot to keep up with Rader and his robot but manage to stay close behind them. After twenty minutes, your group comes upon the Red Death camp fire. The five terrorists are sprawled on the ground, wheezing and snoring loudly.

"Now, Boxer!" urges the Collector. "Use your stun grenades, and let's get this little job done."

The robot removes a long metal tube from his back and points it toward the camp fire. Boxer then loads a spherical shell into the tube and launches the grenade. It explodes in the fire, scattering sparks and burning embers over the screaming terrorists. They try to run, but a fine mist of paralyzing gas spreads over them, causing them to fall to the ground with twitching muscles. You start toward Vik, but Rader stops you.

"Let Boxer do it! That gas won't settle for several minutes." Rader turns to the robot. "Go get the boy who's tied to that tree!"

The security robot whisks his metal bulk into the terrorists' camp, using his foot pods to float above the ground. When the intelligent machine reaches Vik, one of his tentacles

snips the rope binding the boy to the tree. Your brother is unconscious from the stun gas and slumps at the robot's feet. Boxer lifts the boy easily and speeds back to join you and Rader in the shadows.

"Let's go before the gas wears off!" says the Collector. "We've got around thirty minutes before the badders wake up, and maybe a little more for the serfs!"

"What's a serf?" you ask quickly.

"A mutant with some powerful mental tricks. The Red Death cult is full of them! If we don't get out of their sector, there'll be hundreds of their friends swarming all over these woods!"

"But we can't just leave those murderers alive!" you protest.

Rader shakes his head and frowns. "I'm just a businessman, not a warrior. If we kill them, their cult will track us down wherever we go. Even Boxer couldn't protect us from all of those fanatics. Friend, if you want to wage war with the Red Death, I'd advise you to get help from your village!"

1) If you want to return to Olix and get warriors to fight the Red Death, turn to page 21.

2) If you decide that Rader is right and that you should leave the Red Death sector with him and the robot, turn to page 151.

"If there's a way to use the healing secrets of the idol without stealing it, that sounds like the best thing to do," you tell Rader. "How can we copy the idol's memory into Boxer's brain?"

The Collector frowns and shakes his head. "I'm afraid it can't be done without a mental link between the two robots. If I could get them side by side, it'd be easy, but I doubt if the Archivists would let me into the idol's chamber. They're already suspicious."

"Maybe I could do it if you told me how," you suggest.

Rader smiles sadly and pats your shoulder. "It'd take me several months to show you the right wires to connect between the robots' brains, Ard. You might be able to handle it with some kind of machine that could read the idol's memory and then send it into Boxer's brain, but we don't have anything like that."

"Yes, we do!" you exclaim. "We've got Vik's mutant brain! He could be the mental link between them! He can read thoughts—why not computer programs?"

Rader's eyebrows rise and his mouth cracks into a broad grin. "That just might work!" he says. "You could take Vik and Boxer to the temple. The guardroom's next to the idol's shrine, and Vik ought to be able to read its memory through the wall!"

"Good!" interrupts Boxer. "I have always wanted to learn medicine!"

Within a few minutes, the three of you cross

the road to the temple. The frightened mutant pilgrims move aside as soon as they see Boxer, and you go directly to the guardroom inside the shrine.

"What are you doing here?" demands one of the Archivist guards, staring at the robot.

"We've come from Olix to borrow the idol to heal my sister!" you tell him. The guard frowns at first, then begins to laugh. You notice that Vik and Boxer have moved against the wall, where your brother is standing with his eyes shut. You know that you'll have to keep the Archivists busy long enough for the transfer to take place.

"Why are you laughing?" you ask the guard. "Let me tell you what happened. My twin sister, Toki, and I live in Olix. We were adopted by the village when . . ." You begin a long-winded story, dragging out every small detail leading up to Toki's accident. Then you go into even greater detail about everything that has happened since then.

You're nearly finished when another guard enters the room and asks if anything's wrong. When you begin to retell the story of Toki's injury, the first guard yells.

"That's enough! You can't take the idol from the temple, and that's final!"

Suddenly, Vik appears at your elbow with a slight smile on his face. "Come on, Ard. We'll find some other way to heal Toki." Your brother waits for Boxer to leave first and then leads you into the street. As soon as your feet

touch the azfall surface, you begin to run toward the transport.

"We did it!" says Vik as you climb into the vehicle. "I didn't understand any of that stuff, but Boxer copied every bit of it!"

"It is a surprisingly simple program," says the robot. "The surgical routines are especially interesting. They remind me of a plumbing and wiring program someone gave me several centuries ago. The principles are very similar and—"

"Save it for Olix!" calls Rader. "I'm sure we'll be happy to listen to the new, improved Boxer after you heal Toki!" The Collector presses the control buttons of the transport, and you feel the powerful vehicle surge forward on the northward road.

Along the way, Rader points to many unexplored ruins. "Just think of all the information and wealth buried under those piles of rubble, Ard! That's why I left my village to become a Collector. Why don't you two join Boxer and me as soon as Toki's well? We could certainly use your help."

You're so excited and happy that all you can do is grin at Rader. With his help, you'll be able to save Toki's life—and that promises to be only your first success in discovering the secrets of the Ancients!

THE END

You straddle the boy's glowing body and shout in his ear. The fall wasn't a bad one, and he doesn't seem to have any broken bones. The pulsating green glow appears to be the only effect of his accident.

"Vik! Wake up!"

Suddenly, his head begins to toss and turn, as if he's having a nightmare. As soon as he starts to move, the greenish aura begins to fade. Soon it's completely gone, leaving Vik's white face gleaming in the bright moonlight.

"Can you hear me?" you call. "It's Ard! Open your eyes, Vik!"

Your brother's eyelids flutter open. Twin beams of green light shoot forth into your own eyes, penetrating all the way to your brain! The blast is so painful that you thrust your arms in front of your face and twist your head away from Vik's piercing gaze.

When your brain recovers from the probing beams of energy, you drop your arms and see that Vik is staring dumbly at the night sky. You take a strip of soft leather from your pack and bind his eyes gently to stifle his strange power. The boy is too dazed to speak or struggle when you blindfold him.

"Come on, Vik! I'm taking you back to Olix!"

Your brother doesn't answer or even nod his head. Something must have happened to his brain when he fell into the ruined basement filled with the Ancients' death rays. You grab his spear and lead him with your other hand

across the rugged Forbidden Zone.

Along the way, you watch for signs of the humanoid you frightened from his cave, but see nothing moving in this desolate place. You try to talk to Vik during the long trek east, but he remains silent, stumbling over the rubble like a robot. The sun is just beginning to lighten the sky when you finally reach the edge of the barren plain.

Please turn to page 149.

With a loud cry of rage, you hurl Vik's spear at the nearest of the giant snakes. Its stone tip tears into the monster's throat just below its pointed chin. The hood droops suddenly as the mortally wounded creature clutches at the shaft with four of its humanoid hands.

"Don't, Ard! They're menarls, and they want to help us!"

Vik's shrill cry confuses you. The boy has suddenly recovered his voice, and is telling you that these terrible monsters are friendly! You stare at the writhing coils of the dying menarl and see with horror that it's looking directly at you with a human expression of shock and pain!

The other menarl hisses loudly and lunges toward Vik, using its many hands to pull your brother toward its scaly body. The creature coils around the boy so that you can't strike it without hitting Vik.

"No!" your brother cries. "He didn't know! He thought you were attacking me!"

The furious menarl pays no attention to Vik's shouts. Instead, it slithers into the nearest pool of murky water with the boy trapped in its crushing coils. Both of them vanish beneath the black surface, leaving only a stream of frothy bubbles to mark the spot.

"VIK!" you scream in panic, whipping your cutlass from its sheath. Without a second thought, you dive into the inky water.

The swamp pool is much deeper than it seemed from the surface. You try to look for

Vik and his captor, but the water is too murky to see farther than a few inches. Your lungs are straining for air when several huge shapes loom close to your face. You strike at them with your heavy steel blade, but the water slows each blow, and the menarls dodge them easily.

Dozens of hands grab your arms and legs, pulling you down to the muddy bottom. You glimpse Vik's lifeless body floating in front of you just before your overtaxed lungs draw the stagnant swamp water into your mouth.

THE END

The sudden appearance of this stranger in ancient clothing and his powerful robot has confused you. If Vik and Sared could be knocked unconscious simply by striking the metal humanoid, you shudder to think what might happen if he decided to attack you!

"Stay where you are and leave us alone!" you shout, crouching defiantly over Vik's still body with your cutlass ready.

"Settle down," answers the man. "We didn't mean to harm your friends. They'll be just fine in a few days. The robot's screen only shorted some of the switches in their brains, and they have to sleep it off. Come on, Boxer! You've done enough damage to these people. We've got some trading to do!"

The robot turns quickly and glides across the azfall to the human's side. Before they leave, the man points to Sared's unconscious form. "Let me give you a bit of advice, friend," he says. "That one's crazy. If I were you, I'd be careful around him!" Without another word, the strange pair turn and vanish into the darkness. Several minutes later, you hear a low-pitched whine as a machine of some kind speeds away toward the south.

You pull Vik and Sared closer to the fire and try to make them more comfortable. You try to stay awake, but the past day has been so exhausting that you soon fall asleep with your cutlass across your lap.

"Where is that thing, boy? Wake up!" Sared's angry shout thrusts into your groggy

dreams just as his boot prods your back. You sit up quickly, having to squint your eyes in the morning sunlight. The Elder is glaring at you, his mace clutched menacingly in his hand.

"Quit kicking me!" you demand roughly. "It was your own fault that the robot shocked you. He never attacked us!"

Sared's face darkens with rage. "Have you forgotten that it was those demonic machines that destroyed our ancestors? They must never regain their power!"

"I doubt if the robots and other machines of the Ancients could have done all that without some human help," you tell the Elder. "The man seemed to be in control of that one last night!"

"What man?" Sared demands. You had forgotten that he was unconscious when the stranger in the ancient clothes appeared. You describe what happened after the Elder attacked the robot, and tell him what the man said about his robot's energy screen.

"Bah!" he replies. "He was a Collector, one of the lowest forms of human life! They're always meddling in things they don't understand, trying to spread the Ancestors' evil again. We have no choice but to fight them to the death!"

Sared's outburst surprises you. He sounds almost as fanatical as some of the New Dawn Seekers who travel from village to village preaching against the use of Ancient artifacts.

You ignore his final words and bend over Vik's sleeping form.

"Vik! Wake up! We've got to get moving!"

Your brother's eyes open wide, making you jump away from his head. They're glowing with the same blue light you saw cover his body when he attacked the robot!

Why are you looking at me like that? Where's that metal monster? Vik's words form in your mind—he hasn't opened his mouth! Somehow, the boy has acquired the power to project his thoughts directly into your brain! You glance at Sared to see if he has noticed anything, but the Elder is busy packing his gear for the final trek to Nakitz.

"Try to be quiet," you whisper to your brother. "Something has happened to your brain, and I don't want Sared to know. He'd blame the robot and do something crazy. Can you talk?"

Vik's mouth quivers, and finally he answers you in a weak voice. "Just barely, but it's a lot easier to think something right into your mind, Ard! And I can hear your thoughts, too! Right now, you're thinking that the robot's energy screen must have changed my brain somehow."

The boy's right! That's exactly what you were thinking! "Try to walk, Vik," you tell him. "If we can get you to Nakitz, the idol might be able to heal your brain if the robot damaged it."

Your brother clutches your arm and pulls

himself to his feet with your help. *I'll be all right,* he thinks into your mind. *I'm just a little weak and woozy.*

"Pack your gear and let's get started!" calls Sared impatiently. "It'll be noon before we reach the temple!"

You help your brother walk to the azfall road and stay with him far behind the Elder so that you can tell when he needs to rest. The sun is directly overhead when you see smoke from the cooking fires of Nakitz in the distance.

The Archivist town is near the Gulf of Mecksgo, and you can smell the salt water as you enter the ancient village. There are throngs of people everywhere, mostly pilgrims who have come to the temple to be healed by the idol. Many of them are mutants, with twisted and deformed bodies. There are children with two or three heads, women who have paws for hands, men with the scaly skin of reptiles, and many other monstrous victims of the ancient radiation.

You follow the crowds to the temple, where there's a long line of hideous pilgrims waiting for their chance to be healed by the idol. They all stare suspiciously at the three of you because you seem to be the only normal humans in the line.

They hate us, Vik thinks to you without words. *They all want to have normal bodies like ours, and they're wondering why we've come to the temple.*

The boy is enjoying his new telepathic skills.

You see that his eyes have lost much of the blue glow as he scans mind after mind of the pilgrims closest to you in line. Then he glances at Sared, and his face turns pale.

Sared wants to destroy the Idol! he tells you mentally. *He's a secret agent for the New Dawn Seekers and wants to blow up the Archivists' temple!*

The line is moving quickly toward the cavern used as the public place of healing. You must decide what to do about Vik's mental message.

1) If you want to confront Sared with Vik's accusation, turn to page 98.

2) If you decide to report the Elder to the Archivists in the temple, turn to page 66.

The green aura surrounding Vik's body is pulsating in rhythm with his heartbeat, but the glow seems to be subsiding slowly.

"I can't risk moving him—he could have some injuries from the fall," you think quickly. "I'll have to hide him and run for help. If I can find the White Handers, maybe they can heal Vik AND Toki!"

You search the rubble at Vik's feet and find some pieces of an ancient door. You prop the cracked panels over his glowing body and pile some stones around the edge. Then you tie a piece of white cloth from your pack to Vik's spear shaft and stick the spear in the ground, like a flagpole, to mark the spot.

"Hang on, little brother!" you whisper. "I'll be back as soon as I can!" After a final glance, you turn away and head west, toward the Dark Bayou.

You've gone only a few hundred yards when you hear a loud yell from the ruins where you left Vik! At first, you think he's awake and has panicked in the gravelike shelter. Then you hear other human voices yelling and laughing from the same place.

Just as you start to run back, a bright flame cuts through the night sky at Vik's hiding place. You drop to the ground and begin to crawl forward in the shadows of the ruins until you're close enough to see who has discovered your brother.

Please turn to page 18.

"If they won't listen to reason, perhaps they'll respond to force!" you tell the Collector. "Boxer's a powerful robot! If we rush the Archivists using his energy shield, we can get inside the shrine and force them to let us use the idol!"

"That's a dangerous solution," replies Rader. "I'm sure Boxer could do it, but that cavern's filled with relics of the Social Wars. Even I'm not sure about the effects of some of those old weapons."

"You said that the Archivists hardly ever know how to use what they collect," you tell him. "They probably won't be able to do anything if we surprise them."

"I guess you're right," says Rader. "You're the warrior, so I'll let you command our squad of three!"

You wait until dusk, when the mutant pilgrims are packed in the front of the cavern, trying desperately to get into the shrine before dark. The temple guards are busy keeping them quiet and don't notice you and your two strange companions slipping toward the entrance.

"Now!" you yell, running into the mouth of the shrine behind Boxer. The guards at the front of the cavern can't hold back the crowd of mutants long enough to prevent your entry into the shrine. You bolt the heavy double doors, sealing yourselves inside the shrine.

"Look out!" yells Rader. You turn from the door just as four inner guards rush into the

entry hall from a small corridor. They have ancient pistols of some type in their hands, aimed right at you!

"Gas them, Boxer!" Rader's shout distracts the four men, giving you time to dodge behind the security robot's energy shield. Boxer tosses two small cylinders at the guards just as they fire the hand blasters. Laser beams strike the robot's screen, sending flares of pure energy across the room.

The two gas grenades explode with a soft pop, spreading choking fumes among the guards. Rader grabs your arm and pulls you toward a closed door on the right. "We've got to get out of here before that gas gets us, too!" he yells.

You burst through the door into a room filled with long rows of tables and shelves. It's a storeroom of some kind, with hundreds of ancient artifacts lying in the open. Most of them have tags attached to them, but you can't read the Archivists' code. You don't recognize more than a few of the items, but Rader's eyes are wide with amazement as he gazes at the ancient relics.

"This place contains more ancient secrets than any ruin I've ever seen!" he exclaims in wonder. "I don't even know what half these things are!"

"Well, this isn't a good time to study them!" you tell the Collector. "Here they come!" The scarlet uniforms of the Archivists fill the doorway as a dozen of the temple guards fan out

across the chamber. "Use another grenade!" you shout to the robot.

"No!" yells Rader. "Not in here!"

The Collector's warning is too late. Boxer's last gas grenade explodes near one of the shelves, causing a small pouch to ignite. Something very flammable inside the container also explodes, sending a sheet of fire over the wall of shelves. Suddenly, there is a series of jarring blasts as the ancient relics begin to explode one by one! A piece of a table slams into your head seconds before the ceiling of the storage chamber collapses, burying once again some of the Ancients' deadliest secrets—as well as Toki's only chance to live.

THE END

Soon you see the familiar gardens and smoke from the cooking fires of Olix. You urge Vik to walk more quickly, anxious to get him to Forl. On the outskirts of the village, your heart pounds with joy when you see the shaman standing on the path. Pim, the headman, and four of the other Elders are waiting with him.

"Forl! Pim! Help me get Vik inside our hut! He's been burned by the death rays!"

You expect them all to come running to help your brother, but they just stand there with scowls on their faces.

"What's wrong?" you call, pulling Vik toward them. Suddenly, one of the Elders raises a spear and throws it into the dirt of the trail beside your feet!

"Don't come any closer, Ard!" shouts Pim. "You've broken the taboo and entered the Forbidden Zone. If we let you come into the village, our children will turn into monsters! We'll kill both of you if you try to return to Olix!"

"But what about Toki?" you cry. "We have to help her!"

"Your sister will be healed if it is possible," calls Forl. "But you or anything you've touched will not be allowed near her! I warned you not to enter the zone, but you chose to ignore my warning."

"Leave Olix forever, Ard!" commands Pim. "Your cart is waiting on the road to Zreevepor with all your possessions and those of your

brother. You must wander alone, without kinsmen and without a home. Wherever you go, you shall be known as violators of the Forbidden Zone taboo!"

Even from this distance, you can see the tears on the headman's tanned cheeks. Pim has been like a father to all of you, and it is very painful for him to have to drive you away from his village. As you turn to lead Vik away from your home forever, tears roll down your cheeks, too.

THE END

A quick glance at Vik's unconscious body is enough to make your decision for you. "I've got to get my brother away from here!" you tell the Collector. "We'll go with you, but only until we—"

"Boss!" interrupts the robot. "I read humanoids moving toward us from the north!"

"Call the transport, Boxer!"

The robot does a slow turn. "He's using his antenna to zero in on the transport," explains Rader. "There, he's got it!"

The tiny lights in Boxer's dome flash in a new pattern for a few seconds. "The transport is activated, boss," the robot reports in his perfect human voice.

"Good! Now, Ard, let me have a quick look at your brother while we're waiting!"

The Collector bends over Vik and raises the boy's eyelids, then checks the rest of his body. "He'll be okay."

Just then, a tremendous crashing sound makes you jump and reach for your cutlass. A dazzling light, brighter than the moon, is speeding toward you through the forest!

"Relax," says Rader. "That's just my transport. It was twenty miles away, so it took a few minutes to get here." A low, sleek machine of hard plastic and glass zips to a smooth stop beside the robot. The only sound you hear is a low hum. The spotlight on top of the compact vehicle floods the woods with white light, erasing the night shadows.

"Hop in and let's leave this sector to those

fanatics," the Collector orders. "If we're lucky, they'll kill each other!"

Boxer crowds next to Vik in the rear compartment of the four-seat transport, leaving the front passenger seat for you. Rader climbs in behind the driver's console with its panel of flashing lights and presses a few buttons. The robot car lifts smoothly from the ground, hovering a foot above the forest floor, and streaks away from the Red Death sector.

"How does this thing keep from hitting the trees?" you ask nervously.

"Sonar," answers Rader. "The same thing that bats use. Ever see a bat run into a tree? The Ancients used sonar to keep people from running into each other on their highways, but I use it to dodge rocks and trees now that the roads are empty. By the way, we've just reached the old southern road and are headed for Nakitz!"

It's too dark outside to see more than a blur of trees and bushes rushing past. You glance back at your brother snuggled next to the robot and are pleased to see that he's beginning to stir.

"He'll be fine. Try not to worry," Rader says gently.

"It's Toki I'm worried about, not Vik!" you exclaim. "I have to bring that idol to her before she dies!"

Please turn to page 125.

"Perhaps I could find a way to pay them to heal Toki," you tell Rader.

"The only things that interest the Archivists are ancient relics," he replies. "They worship anything made before the Social Wars, even if they don't understand what it is! That's the main difference between an Archie and a Collector."

"Where can I find some artifacts—and fast?" you ask Rader.

The Collector twists around in the seat and reaches behind him into the transport's rear compartment. He hands you a pair of shiny flat discs with hundreds of prongs along their edges. "Take these to that priestess in the red skinsuit," he says gruffly. "They're more than enough to buy the services of their precious idol."

"What are they?" you ask him.

"She'll know what they are. Go on! You're wasting time! Help him with the girl, Boxer."

You're a little confused by Rader's sudden grouchiness, but climb out of the transport and wait for the robot to lift your sister from the rear seat. Then you walk past the crowd of mutants and into the shrine behind Boxer's powerful figure.

Inside the cavern, you see the priestess who sent you away from the line. When she notices Boxer, and your sister wrapped in his arms and tentacles, she stops talking to one of her guards and approaches you. "Why did you come back?" she demands. "I told you we

didn't want to have anything to do with Collectors or their friends!"

"I've brought something to pay for the services of your idol," you reply. "These should be enough." You wave the two metal discs at her, not expecting the reaction she has when she sees them.

"Where did you get those discs?" she demands fiercely. "Are there any more? We'll pay whatever you ask!"

"All I want is for your idol to heal my sister," you reply. "Two is all I have."

"Fool!" scoffs the priestess, grabbing the pair of discs. "One sundisc would have been enough to heal a dozen of the most hideous mutants in Nakitz! Tell your robot to take your sister into the healing room and place her on the table in front of the idol."

You see that she's pointing to a pair of double doors guarded by two men. You lead Boxer through the doors, entering a large round chamber. In the center of the room stands a robot. It looks almost exactly like Boxer, with the same brain dome, arms, and tentacles. The only difference you can see is that this one has some tiny tools at the ends of its tentacles.

"So this is the famous idol of Nakitz!" you exclaim to Boxer. "The healing secrets of the Ancients are nothing but a computer program in the brain of a medical robot!"

"That may be true, human," answers Boxer, "but it is a most powerful program." The robot places your sister on a steel table in front of

the idol and rejoins you against the wall. The medical robot's brain cells begin to flash, and a wide beam of red light scans Toki's body.

"My sensors tell me that the robot is using X rays on your sister," says Boxer. "It is preparing for surgery." While the idol is studying the girl's injury, you ask your metal companion about the two objects Rader gave you to trade for Toki's treatment.

"What were those things the priestess called sundiscs? Why did she want them so much?"

"Those were solar energy cells with enough outlets on each one for a large building," replies Boxer. "They are very rare and highly sought artifacts."

"How many of them does Rader have?"

"None now. Those were the only two we have ever found." Boxer's answer astounds you. The Collector gave you two of his most precious artifacts to save Toki's life! Your eyes are moist as you watch the idol of Nakitz begin the delicate surgery on your sister's brain.

The operation itself goes more quickly than the preparations. The medical robot's tentacles and hands move very fast and with the greatest precision. The tiny instruments in its grasp are extremely delicate, designed for microscopic operations on individual nerve cells. In less than three minutes, the operation is finished, and the idol injects your sister with some kind of fluid from a large tube.

Almost instantly, Toki's eyes open, blink twice, and then widen in horror when she sees the metal monster that has just saved her life.

"Toki!" you call. "Don't be scared. You're all right now!"

Your sister bounds from the operating table and rushes into your arms. Tears of joy flood your eyes. With the help of your two new friends, you've saved your sister's life!

Many miles and words later, you glance at Toki, sitting next to Boxer in the transport's backseat. The girl has already lost her fear of the robot and is milking Boxer's huge memory banks for information about the last several hundred years.

"Listen to them," you tell Rader. "She'll never be satisfied again with the fearful superstitions and beliefs of the Elders in Olix!"

The Collector studies the excitement in your own face and smiles. "And neither will you, Ard. Neither will you!"

THE END

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ISBN 0-88038-217-1

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